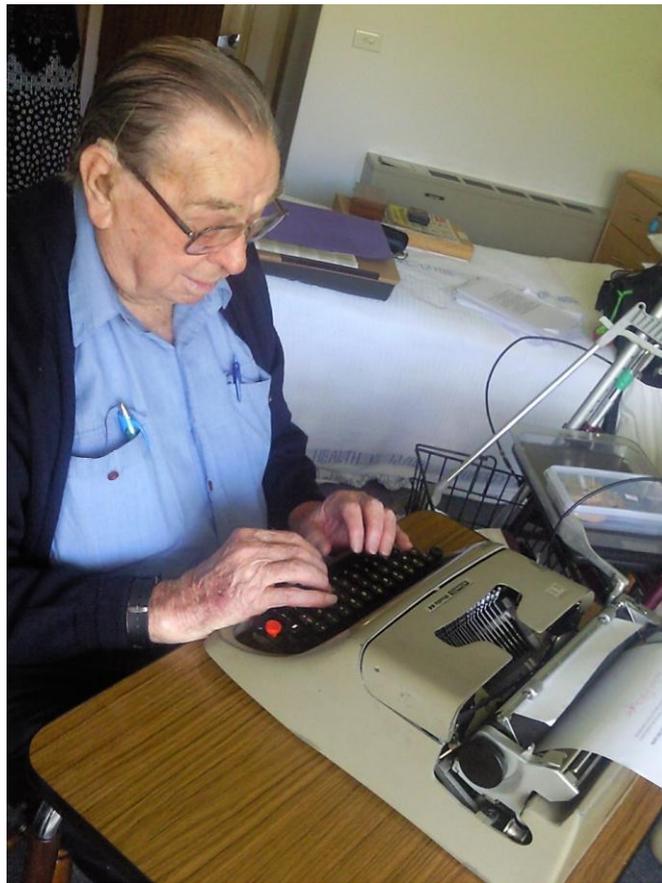


THE JOURNO FROM THE BUSH



Tasman Pellas

Acknowledgements

My brother Ivan was the instigator of these memoirs. After I suffered my stroke the day following my 80th birthday party, I thought aloud "What am I going to do with my life?" Ivan, who had come up to Sydney from Bendigo for the party, replied "Why not write about your life up to this point?" Or words to that effect, hence these memoirs.

To provide a family background of just how I came to arrive on Planet Earth, and of continuing family relationships, I needed many reference points. Frank Pellas (Ivan's son) solved to problem with his two centimetre thick family tree dating back to my great grandfather. Published in 1996, this valuable history covers six generations with 604 individual descendants scattered worldwide, including Finland, Sweden, Australia and USA.

Worthy contributions have been made by my sister Betty (Elizabeth Joy Vanstan) and my sister in law Ethel (nee Quick). The whole family of my daughter Wendy and her husband Mike Allan have been involved in a myriad of ways, with special mention of my granddaughter Bec who I regard and refer to as my "publisher" – a skilful master at that craft.

Finally no memoirs of mine would be complete without the acknowledgement of my late wife Betty, without whom my life would have been forever incomplete.

The beginning	
Leversha	
Education	
Intermission	
Electricity and magnetism	
Early childhood	
Post office and other additions	
Indian Hawker	
Cricket	
Boy Scouts	
Depression	
Dad’s bad leg.. and temper	
Wahroonga	
Picnics and holidays	
Mt Alexander	
Starting work	
The big smoke	
The bush	
Army life	
Darwin bound	
War and the family	
Civilian life	
Union Secretary	
No home...or job	
Life begins	
Life in suspension	
Life revives at Nepean Times	
Cumberland Newspaper	
Taking on Rupert	
The Chapmion	
Public Relations	
Worm Farmer	
Complete Retirement	
A widowers life	
Fred Neale	
Roses	
Toby Two	
Fishing	
Final thoughts	
Post Script	

chapter one- the beginning

nnumerable people have asked me how I got my first name.

My name is Tasman Phillip Pellas. It is "Tasman" that they are enquiring about. The answer makes a good story and is an ideal way to start these memoirs.

The story hinges on a war injury suffered by my father. His name was August Percival Philip Pellas. He was known as Perce. His close friends called him Pip, for short. I'll call him Dad, for short.

Dad was an original Anzac, landing on Gallipoli with the first wave on April 25, 1915. He was a signaller. On May 8, he was sent out to repair the broken telephone line from battalion headquarters (7th battalion) to the front line. While making the repair, he was wounded in the left leg. I always understood the wound was caused by shrapnel. However, his war records show: "B. W.Thigh"... bullet wound in the thigh.

Although the powers-that-be did their best (worst?) to get him back into action, the war was over for Dad, but not before a lot of hospitalization, and at one stage being given up for dead. The injury was too bad to be treated at Gallipoli, so he was transferred to hospital ship. However, there were far worse injuries on board and his was not regarded as serious. Dad was left on the top deck, out in the open. That night, it poured with rain, resulting in him developing pneumonia.

At the next port of call, a land-based hospital in Alexandria, I believe, but it may have been Malta, he was so ill he was put out on a balcony and left to die. A devoted nurse thought she could save his life. She did.

The next problem the doctors faced: How to treat the hole through Dad's leg? They came to the conclusion that they would have to amputate. Dad refused to accept that solution, saying if he survived the war he had an orchard to maintain. Finally, a Doctor Tasman said he could operate on the leg and eventually save it. Dad's response to that was "If you do that, I'll name my first son 'Tasman' after you."

And that is how I got my first name.

• • •

I have just finished reading a book written by the famous actor/film star Alec Guinness at the age of 81 years. Suffering from loss of memory at times, as most of us do at that age, he titled it "My Name Escapes Me". If I suffer a similar fate – and at the age of 84 as I start committing this rough part-draft of memoirs to the computer, I am fast developing that problem – I'll only need to refer to Page One of this document to at least get part of my name right.

To get the rest of my name, I will have to dive back in time almost a couple of centuries.

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My grand-father, Johan Hermanson Pellas, was born in Jungsund, Finland, on March 15, 1863. He and his younger brother, August Hermanson (born February 24, 1871), became sailors. They jumped ship in Melbourne and headed north along what was to become the Calder Highway (My brother, Ivan, believes August – Gus – arrived in Australia much later. However, I'm sticking with my version; it makes a better story). I don't know what year it was, but as we will see later, Johan (John as he became known) must have been no older than 25.

My great-grandfather, Philip Traven, found the brothers under the Calder Highway Bridge over Barker's Creek at Harcourt, where they had spent the night. Great-grand-father Philip must have needed help on his property, Hillside, and he promptly employed them. Perhaps, even at that early stage, his apple-and-pear orchard was bearing fruit and he needed pickers.

Grandpa John soon picked up the language fairly well (even so, 50 years on he could not get his tongue around "Tasman"- he always called me "Tashmon"). Uncle Gus was another matter. He never learned to sound the letter "J". The story has been handed down from generation to generation of the time he was working for Harold Douglas, a neighbour of Philip Trevean's. The horse pulling the spray pump wouldn't move forward to the next tree when commanded. No matter what Harold did, the horse wouldn't respond. Angry, frustrated, Harold landed a kick to the horse's belly. Still no response. Harold really lost his temper, took a run at the horse and kicked it with both feet. As Uncle Gus told the story: "By yingo, he did yump." I still do not know if he meant the horse or Harold did the "yumping"!!!

Philip Trevean must have been well satisfied with John as a man and a worthy character, as he gave away his daughter, Eliza Jane, in marriage, to him. Their first child, my Uncle Herman, was born on November 23, 1888, when John was 25 years old. Then followed four more sons and four daughters. Between them, John and Gus founded a Pellas dynasty, for Gus had four sons and a daughter. As an example of that dynasty...When I was entering my teens, we fielded a full Pellas cricket team of eleven males. I was the youngest player in that team.

Incidentally, my father was the first to inherit his grand-father's name of "Philip". Since then, it has been in every generation, even unto the fourth, with one "I" or two. The latest inheritor is my grandson, Ricky Philip Allan. I mention the double "I" because Dad, when he was registering my birth, was not sure of the spelling. So I became the first and, as far as I know, the only "Phillip" in the dynasty.

Sadly, the family name "Pellas" is in the decline in Australia, because most of the recent progeny have been of the female gender.

• • •

Apart from his work in apple-and-pear orchards, Grandpa Pellas was in great demand in Harcourt's other main industry: granite-quarrying.

Trevean's orchard was at the very foot of Mount Alexander, a name made famous in the gold rush days. Mount Alexander goldfields were the first such area in Victoria. About two miles north of the orchard, the first quarry, Bright's (or was it Blight's?), opened up to relieve the mountain of its heavy base material, granite. To handle that material, cranes were needed. Cranes need heavy steel wire cables. That is where Grandpa's sailor skills became important. He was needed to splice the hooks to the end of the ropes, and all similar splicing jobs. I have always understood that a splicing accident was responsible for the loss of the forefinger of his right hand.

The quarry was in the foothills of the mountain, which ran approximately north and south. So Grandpa only had to walk two miles along the base of the mountain to work.

I know that these memoirs are supposed to be about the life of one Tasman Phillip Pellas, and here I am concentrating on one Johan Hermanson Pellas. However, Grandpa was an important person in my life, as I hope I am important in the life of my grandsons. Of the two that I feel closest to, one of them, Ricky Philip Allan, is the fifth generation bearer of the name "Philip".

So, let me, briefly, continue touching on the memoirs of that tough character, Grandpa John. I say "tough character" because well into his seventies he helped Dad prune the orchard. On the coldest of frosty mornings in July and August, he would be out there, keeping pace with Dad.



When I was about 12 years of age, Grandpa Pellas really came into my life. He bought a boat. He berthed it on Harcourt Reservoir, one and a half kilometres from "Wahroonga", our home.

The "Res" as it was locally called, was five kilometres in circumference and was stocked with redfin perch. (If you have the patience to pick out the bones, redfin perch are the sweetest fish to eat that I know. Most fishermen I have spoken to look down on the humble redfin. When they are hungry, they are easy to catch, and their boniness, also, counts against them. However, they are good fun to catch and I prefer them above all others to eat). Needless to say, when Grandpa, Dad or one of my older cousins invited me to go fishing in the boat, I jumped at the opportunity. My brother Ivan and I spent many a happy hour catching fish, often two at a time when they were biting well.

When he got tired of fishing, Grandpa would hark back to his early days on the water in Finland. He would hoist the sail of the five-metre dinghy on the Res at Harcourt. The limited distance between opposite shores necessitated frequent tacking. Grandpa would call out: "'ware boom". If you did not 'ware boom, you would get a nasty crack on the head as the long boom holding the bottom of the sail swung across the boat to catch the wind from another direction. You would not neglect to beware boom ever again.

I well remember one boat outing when we were caught in a "southerly buster"- a severe wind change. Dad and Grandpa were with me that day. It was unusual for them to be both unaware of the possibility, because they were both weather-wise. Dad had to get the sail down before it was torn to shreds. In the meantime, the boat was being driven towards the northern shore, where the trees protruded into the water some 50 metres or more.

Dad told me to take the tiller, which I had never handled before, still being only 12 years old. Standing up, one each side of the boat, hanging on to the mast, Dad and Grandpa tried fending off the tightly packed trees. In the process, they rocked the boat. This, together with the strong wind and unusual waves, made steering difficult, if not impossible, for an inexperienced sailor-boy. However, our combined efforts enabled us to reach the shore

with little damage to the craft or its occupants. If I had been a Steinbeck, I could possibly build this story up to rival his "Old Man and the Sea", but, alas, I am only a Pellas.

• • •

Alas, too, the time came when Grandpa became too old, frail and feeble to manage handling the boat. He would not admit it; absolutely refused to recognize the problem.

Many years had gone by. I had been to the war, World War Two, and was working in Melbourne. A letter arrived from my Uncle Herman, asking me if I could help to sell the boat. The whole family did not want the boat sold locally, for sentimental reasons. It would probably have remained on the Res, tormenting Grandpa if he knew, and saddening family members to see other people using it.

One of the draftsmen in the drawing office where I was employed said he wanted a small boat to sail on Port Phillip Bay. So, off he went to Harcourt. That weekend, Uncle Herman must have been behind with his spraying program, because he was out spraying the apple trees. A typical city man, Bob Gardner, the draftsman, was so intrigued with the horse-driven spray pump, he entertained the whole office all the next week with a description of it and the work it did.

That was the end of our fishing trips on the Res, for Bob brought the boat home to end its days on the bay. I was never to fully enjoy fishing again until I bought my own boat just before reaching retirement age.

chapter two - Leversha

While the previous chapter was devoted, ostensibly, to the origin of my name, there are always two sides of a family name. My name may be Pellas, but most of those who know the other side of the family would say my personality and character make me more of a Leversha.

My brother, Ivan, and sister, Shirley, definitely inherited the Pellas genes, but my younger sister, Betty (Elizabeth Joy), became mostly Leversha. Therefore, my mother's family name is equally important. My mother's maiden name was Ethel Beatrice Leversha. Despite any impression given in the previous chapter, I was much closer to Mum than to any other family member.

Strangely, like the given name 'Philip' on the male side, 'Ethel' is dominant on the female side down to my generation. My father had sister Ethel (who, incidentally lived to be 100 years old), Uncle Herman married Ethel Faull, and brother Ivan married Ethel Quirk.

But let's get on with the Leversha story.

My great-grandfather, Henry Leversha, left Somerset, England, to join the gold rush in Victoria. He made his way, by bullock dray, wheel-barrow and various other means, to Bacchus Marsh, Ballarat, Castlemaine and Bendigo. He wrote in the publication "Records of the Castlemaine Pioneers" that when digging for gold proved unprofitable; he turned his hand to store-keeping. One 'lighter' moment occurred when he was charged with selling sly-grog. In his tent, he had a cask of brandy, which had been removed from a neighbouring tent which was about to be raided by the police. Henry started selling the brandy. He was reported to the police, but a friendly officer warned of the ensuing raid. In the rush to remove the brandy, some spilled on the dirt floor, to disguise the strong residual smell, Henry tried to burn the brandy off, as done with Christmas cake. He was not very successful. The senior constable in charge of the raiding party was unable to find any sly-grog, but Henry was hard put to convince him that he had not buried brandy on the premises.

• • •

I know less about my other grandfather Robert Leversha than my Grandpa Pellas. I found him to be quietly spoken, almost self-effacing. Give him a plug of tobacco and his pipe: that was all he needed to be content. He was the only person I knew who smoked plug tobacco. I can see him now, sitting in his favourite chair in the corner by the open fire during the winter months, not saying a word, paring tobacco off the plug with his well-worn sharp knife.

Grandpa Leversha was a hardy soul. He used to walk 15 kilometres or more to work. He was working then, at one of the slate quarries near the village of Barkers Creek. Incidentally, that village proudly bears a monument to the finder of the first gold of the Mount Alexander goldfield. Unfortunately, his is one of the many whose name now escapes me.

On the way to and from the quarry, Grandpa frequently caught rabbits, which, in those days, provided a major source of meat for the family meals. Mainly, he used to dig the rabbits out of the burrows. Until recently, I had the very small pick, with the very short handle, that Grandpa used to unearth those rabbits. Sadly, it perished in the fire that badly damaged the family home of my daughter, Wendy, in May, 2003.

Some years ago – it probably was about five years before my eightieth birthday – the Leversha family had a reunion in Castlemaine. Part of the celebrations was a bus tour of the former Leversha properties in Woodbrook. Passing the local public hall, I vaguely remembered attending some similar celebration there when only about six or seven years old. Was it a “Back to Woodbrook” affair? I dimly remembered sitting on the sill of an open window while the oldies danced the night away.

I also remembered a trip on which I had driven my mother during one of my frequent visits from Sydney in the latter years of her life. Perhaps it was in response to her request to see, for one last time, the places of her childhood. One of the highlights, for her, was to show me a tree that her Leversha grandfather had imported as a sapling from, I think, India, of all places. Whatever its source, there it was, still standing, in all its fine greenery, alone in a paddock of dry grass, some seventy-odd years, at least, after it was planted. Mum did not know the name of the tree, and I never found it out.



One of my earliest pleasant memories hovers around our weekend visits to Grandma Leversha's at Harcourt. I do not know, at first hand, when they shifted from Woodbrook, and I was never told. It was always Grandma Leversha's or Grandma Pellas's. Grandpa's never got a mention when their homes were concerned. Eventually, those homes became “Bottom Grandma's” and “Top Grandma's” respectively. More about that later.

Those weekend visits were always made on foot, through paddocks and lanes for the three miles (about five kilometres) between our homes. Finally, we had to cross Barkers Creek at the foot of Grandpa's small orchard property. (Yes, Grandpa was recognized as owning the property, but it was always “Grandma's” we visited.). This creek crossing tested our young legs as we had to scramble down the bank, jump over the water, many a time in flood, up the other bank, climb over a fence and up a steady rise to the cottage. However it was well worthwhile. Apart from the pleasure of seeing our grand-parents, we knew Uncle Rob would be there with a bag of lollies for us.

Uncle Rob was one of Mum's three brothers. It was just as well there were no breathalyser tests those days. He lived in Castlemaine, where he worked in a butcher's shop. Evidently, he always spent quite some time in a pub before driving his small 10hp Ford the seven miles out to Grandma's. Uncle Rob was also fond of a bet on the horse-races. He spent a lot of his visiting time twiddling the three dials of the wireless radio so he could hear the results out of the huge horn speaker.

After we had gobbled down our lollies, quite often we children – Shirley, Ivan, Elizabeth Joy (Betty Kinkles, as we called her) and I – would walk the 100 metres up to the Calder

Highway. There, we would sit midst the kerbside trees, playing odds and evens. This involved the last digit of the passing cars' number-plates. Each weekend, we would take it in turn to be "odd" or "even". At the end of the day, the pair with the highest tally was the winner.

Probably a brief description of Grandma's home – and Grandpa's property – would not be out of place. The drive down from the highway was a water-worn dirt track. If I remember rightly, a late attempt was made to add some road-metal, particularly up at the highway gate. The house plan was in two sections two rooms in front, divided from four rear rooms by a breezeway. A hip roof covered the two front rooms and a similar hip covered the front two rooms of the rear section, with a skillion ending the roof line. The front entrance was a side door opening into the breezeway. Wooden steps led up to the back verandah and the rear entrance. There were a number of out-buildings. A wood shed, tool shed and a chook-house were combined in one building near the house. Fenced off in front of the house and pepper trees was an open yard. Beyond that was a group of buildings, including the privy (toilet), stables, sheds housing the jinker and/or buggy (maybe both), plus farm equipment. I don't know if the vehicles were ever used; the farm equipment, either, because the orchard was rented out to a neighbour.

We children, though, were only interested in two rooms of the house: the kitchen and the sitting room. We had luscious afternoon teas in the one and Uncle Rob's lollies in the other.

Perhaps I should earlier have indicated the locations of the two families, the Pellas's and Leversha's in the Harcourt valley. I was tempted to say "juxtapositions" instead of "locations". However, they did not lie side by side; far from it, they lay three miles (5km) apart. That didn't stop them inter-marrying: my father's sister, Alice Pellas, married my mother's brother, Perce Leversha. My cousin, Olive Pellas, married my cousin, Cliff Leversha. Most unlike the Martins and Coys, of literary fame.

Be that as it may, the Leversha clan occupied "Sunnyside", as the western hills were known, and the Pellas mob ranged along "Hillside", as the Mount Alexander area, in the east, was known. This leads me into a brief description of Grandma Pellas's home and Grandpa Pellas's property.



Their house was named "Hillside"; like ours was named "Wahroonga" and Uncle Herman's had another name, which, again, escapes me. However, because Grandpa's property was established umpteen years ago, dating back to Philip Trevean, the general Pellas area was (maybe still is) known as "Hillside".

Strangely, I don't remember ever visiting "Hillside" with any of my siblings. We never visited Top Grandma's (more about that name later) as a family – always with Dad absent – as we did "Sunnyside". There is a bit of the Martin and Coy feud ring about that; though if it was, it was all hidden under the surface from us young ones. There again, I never stayed overnight at Bottom Grandma's, as I did for a week or more at "Hillside". My days there coincided with the birth, at Wahroonga, of my sister, Bet. It may have been considered inappropriate to have an eight year old boy, with an inquiring mind, around at such a time. The effect on Ivan, less than four years younger, was that a "squalling brat" (or words to that effect) had arrived in the household.

"Hillside", was built by Grandpa Pellas with his own hands. Apparently, he had some experience as a builder before his days as a sailor. Like the Leversha residence, the house was built in two sections, only, in this case, the breezeway, if you could call it that, was open ground. So the building was in two definite sections, separated by about four metres, one higher than the other due to the sloping ground.

The high rear section was mainly a huge kitchen, with a substantial pantry opening off one end and a laundry-cum-bathroom (called in those days a washhouse) off the other. Completing this section, although built on the lower level and slightly separated, was a

dairy. Obviously a late addition, the dairy was built of bricks, concrete I think. (All the other buildings of these two homes – Pellas's and Leversha's -were weatherboard covered timber frames).

Whenever I visited "Hillside", the kitchen was the centre of activity, becoming a sitting room, too, although I never saw Grandma doing much sitting!!! Grandpa had his chair and pipe off to one side of the huge open fire and Uncle Jack had his complicated wireless set alongside a sofa ranged along the opposite wall. Known as KangyJack to differentiate from his cousin CrackaJack, Uncle Gus's son, he was still single at the time and the only one of the large family living at home. "Kangy" came from his penchant for shooting kangaroos on Mount Alexander and beyond.

The kitchen was dominated by a large table. It was big enough to sit two at each end and five on each side. It had to be to accommodate a family of eleven: parents, five boys and four girls. Apart from the open fire, over which always hung a mammoth kettle or tureen, there was an adjacent, very efficient woodfire stove. If it wasn't the famous, renowned Aga, it was very similar. The table served as the only bench top for Grandma's cooking activity, in the same way as our table at Wahroonga, of similar size, enabled Mum to do the cooking.

Opening off the kitchen, the wash-house –combined laundry and bathroom –was very narrow. Perhaps that is the reason why the mangle – a huge, very old-fashioned clothes-wringer – was located in the dairy, at the other end, and separated from, the kitchen. As I remember it, the other, lower section of the house was a dark, gloomy collection of bedrooms. During my stay at "Hillside", for a week while Betty was born, I slept on the front veranda, wafted to sleep by the breeze rustling the fronds of the palm tree in the front garden.

"Hillside" was built virtually on the foothill level of Mount Alexander, with a drive of about 150 metres leading up through the apple orchard from a road which I only recently discovered was named Reservoir Road. In my time, our only address was: "Wahroonga", Harcourt North – no street number, no road name, and most of the time the house name was omitted. Like the "Sunnyside" counterpart, Grandpa Pellas had placed the out-buildings in front of the house. There was a clutter of low sheds housing farm equipment and vehicles, including Uncle Jack's car, and incorporating a chook-house. Most impressive, though, was a barn, built European style, double-storied. On the front wall of the top storey, there was double door, opening on space. To my young mind, on first seeing it, and long after, I could not understand how people could get into or out of that door from open space.



"Top Grandma's"... how it came about: Now that I have given the general locations within the Harcourt district of my grand-parents' homes, the time is ripe to tell how "Hillside", in particular, gained its new, commonly used name.

First of all, though, the location of our home "Wahroonga" in relation to the other two homes must be fixed. Like "Hillside", our home was on Reservoir Road, but on the other, lower side, and about a kilometre north, towards the reservoir, which made it lower still. As mentioned earlier, "Sunnyside" bordered Barkers Creek, which flowed along the lowest level of the valley.

Most of the Harcourt residents did their week's shopping on Friday in Castlemaine, about 13 km away, to the south. On the Friday in question, Mum was unable to go shopping, but Grandma Pellas never missed. Grandma Leversha, on the other hand, never left the house, to my knowledge. She, apparently, left it to Grandpa to obtain her groceries from the local Harcourt store. However, at seven years of age, I never knew, nor was ever concerned with my grand-parents' shopping schedules. I was mostly concerned with riding my brand-new tricycle.

Because Dad's war injury left one leg shorter than the other, his footwear had to be specially hand-made and needed frequent repairs. On this Friday, Mum said to me: "Go DOWN to Grandma's on your tricycle and take Dad's boots. Grandma will take them to the boot-maker when she goes shopping."

Full of importance, I hustled around, found a carry-bag (half of a woven, hempen sugar bag with a rope handle), shoved the boots into it, and hopped on my trike. I had never ridden either up to Grandma Pellas or down to Grandma Leversha. To ride the extra distance – about twice as far as "Hillside" – would be no small feat, particularly because I would have to ride across a small paddock and cross a creek.

So I set off along the road – rough dirt and gravel, with grooves running across it in those days – in the direction of Grandma Pellas's, so far as Mum was concerned. She would not have seen me, a kilometre along Reservoir Road, turn right instead of going straight ahead to "Hillside". The right turn took me into the two kilometre long downhill road known locally as George Ely's Lane. After walking the trike (tricycle) across the narrow paddock, I man (boy)-handled it down the bank of the creek, jumped the water and struggled up the other bank.

To Grandma's credit, I don't remember any fuss, although she must have been puzzled and in a quandary how to handle the situation. So far as I was concerned, it was "mission accomplished". The highlight of the return journey, as I turned into the home straight, Reservoir Road, was seeing the parents of my school heart-throb, Mr. and Mrs. Jones, in a horse-and-jinker, obviously on the way to Castlemaine.

How the boots ever reached their destination remains a mystery. Maybe the problem was sorted out during our Sunday visit to "Sunnyside" two days later.

Maybe it was one of the rare occasions when Dad, cranky after a hard day's physical labour, with his wounded leg troubling him, lost his temper and physically attacked Mum. I well remember, on a couple of occasions, Mum setting off with us kids for Grandma's of a Sunday, bruised and battered, crying her heart out. One night, in the middle of such a rowdy argument, leading to physical harm, I got out of bed and told Dad I would kill him if he did not stop belting Mum. I was a bit older, about twelve, on that occasion.



My two grand-mothers deserve a brief mention of their own. It will have to be brief, for I had little contact with them. It seems to me that whenever I saw Grandma Pellas, she was always cooking. She was a good cook. There was, frequently, a large basin alongside the stove, in which dough was rising, soon to turn into mouth-watering hot bread. Quite often raisins and sultanas were added to the dough to make raisin bread.

Grandma Leversha's forte was home-made brawn. Sometimes it appeared on the table during our Sunday afternoon teas, and I made short work of it. There was always jam and clotted cream. That was where I got my love for fig jam and cream. One day Grandpa was laying on the cream very thickly over his jam. At only five or six years old, looking after my own interests, obviously, I cried "Steady on, Grandpa!" It became a family cry, later, if one of us was becoming greedy.

The Leversha fires mainly used coal as fuel, particularly in the sitting room's open fire place. Grandpa would go to the nearby railway line and fill bags of the coal dropped on the line from the bunkers of passing steam engines. For some reason, Dad was scornful of this occupation. However, it did not stop me from doing the very same thing very much later in life. When living at Emu Plains, we had a coal-burning heater in our lounge-room and a railway line in easy walking distance. Daughter Wendy, then about five or six years old, liked nothing better than to accompany me over to that railway line. In between waving to passing train drivers, she would scramble after chunks of coal. "Here's a *bobby-dazzler*. Dad", she would say. That became family saying for any degree of excellence. It even

inspired the popular name of their pure-bred collie dog decades later when she had a family of her own.



As I have mentioned, Dad was from a large family, with four brothers and four sisters. He was born on February 25, 1892. In their young days, there was no school at Harcourt North, as the "Hillside" area later became known. So they had to walk five kilometres to Harcourt for their schooling.

Dad often told the story of the first motor-cars to pass through Harcourt on their way to and from Bendigo. The pupils could hear them crossing the Calder Highway Bridge - under which Philip Trevean had originally found John Pellas - in time to run the 200 metres from schoolyard to highway. There they would gaze in awe at this latest form of transport.

For recreation, Dad played Australian Rules football with the Harcourt club. I never heard of him, in his youth, playing cricket, which he did, regularly, in later life. He also played the euphonium in a brass band, which I think was also based in Harcourt. His cricket-playing was for a team named Brooks, at Harcourt North. The team acquired its name from the playing field, which was located between two brooks.

At the age of 22, Dad enlisted early in World War 1, in August 1914, in the 7th Battalion. After training in Egypt, the battalion headed for the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign. I have earlier mentioned his war injury and the trauma that caused. He was put on board on the Ulysses on January 18, 1916, for return to Australia. In mid-ocean, the inward-bound Ulysses was passing an outward-bound troopship, heading for France. They both heaved-to for the exchange of greetings. When Ulysses was asked if there were any Victorians on board, Dad was too ill to respond. He later learned that his two brothers, Ivan and Frank, were on board that troopship. They were both killed in France during the last days of the war. My brother, Ivan Francis, was named after them. Dad was discharged from the army on August 26, 1916, two years and five days after enlisting.

With great foresight, Grandpa Pellas had purchased two properties of approximately 100 acres each, fronting Reservoir Road, just north of "Hillside". These adjacent lands were for Dad and his brother, Uncle Herman. Being almost stone deaf, Uncle Herman's role in the Army was very limited, although, I think, he did serve as an instructor. Uncle Gus, Grandpa's brother, had a similar sized adjoining property, with Herman's in the middle.

My knowledge of the time frame of Dad's life after discharge lacks detail, which the prevailing years have probably blurred somewhat, in any case. I do know there was a reception committee and a cheering crowd at the railway station when the train bearing Dad arrived on his return to Harcourt. Dad was greatly embarrassed; he never talked about it, nor did he ever talk about the serious side of his war service...nothing about the landing...nothing about the live action...nothing about his injury...only about the humorous side of army life, such as his training in Egypt and his few trips on leave to Cairo. Even the memory of those stories escape me. I remember one word that stays with me: "Imshree" which means, in today's lingo, "get lost".

Dad must have spent a lot of time being hospitalized, but, as soon as he was able, he set about organising his new property. Probably the first thing he did was to set up a house. This he did by buying a house in Maldon, a gold-mining town some 25 kilometres or so west of Harcourt. He then had it transported by a special house-moving jinker to his Harcourt property, which Mum and he had named "Wahroonga". The house, I think, was moved in two sections. As horses would have had to be the moving force - the "horsepower" so to speak - the double journey must have extended over several days. Decades later, I drove Mum on a trip to Maldon and she showed me the very spot our home, "Wahroonga", had occupied in that town. I will give greater details about our home later, but, before that, I must introduce our "home-builder", my mother. All the other characters leading up to my

existence have been given a brief history. Now it is time for the most important character, Mum, to be given a go.



As I have mentioned previously, Mum had three brothers, Herb, Perce, and Rob. What I haven't mentioned: she had a sister, Susie, who died at a very young age; in her early 'teens' I think. From her reaction whenever Susie was mentioned, which wasn't very often, Mum was devastated by the death. I don't remember hearing details about the cause of death, but I gather it was the ever-present scourge of health in those days, TB (tuberculosis). My mother was born as Ethel Beatrice Leversha on January 7, 1894, at Woodbrook, Victoria. She grew up in that farming district, which is about 20 kilometres west and slightly north of Castlemaine. Like her father, Mum was of rugged country stock, and like her father also, walking long distances did not trouble her. She walked those 20 k's to what was eventually become Castlemaine High School. Once a week this happened for her to attend cooking classes. Mum put those lessons into good practice. I can still conjure up the tastes of Rabbit friend in batter, Fig Jam and scalded butter, homemade bread, cream puffs, baked apples with honey, hot buttered scones, Jam Roly Poly's, and freshly picked mushrooms from our paddocks, cooked to her own special recipe. These are just a few samples of Mum's cooking and of the way she prepared herself for marriage.



My father and mother were married on Easter Saturday, March 30, 1918. The first of their four children, I arrived on the scene, reasonably early, on October 11, 1919. At times, Mum must have thought I had arrived *too early* because, on her deathbed, she said to me: "Maybe you would have had a better life if we had waited." I assured her that I had a happy life and would not have changed it a bit.

Having settled into their new home on their new property, it was time to set about earning a living. This was also the time to see country neighbourliness at its best. All the orchardists in the nearby area rallied around and helped Dad to plant his own orchard. I was later to see an example of this when, as a very young boy, a similar gathering helped in extending the planting. These few rows were always referred to as the "young" orchard.

However, apple and pear trees take few years to bear fruit and Dad had to find some means to put other food on the table. He found employment as a road maintenance contractor. I suppose "contractor" is the right word, rather than "worker", because he had to supply a horse and dray. One of my earliest memories – earlier than my "boots" trip to Grandma Leversha's – was one where I found myself "on the road", literally, with Dad.

The road was the Calder Highway, linking Bendigo with Melbourne, under the Harcourt Bridge of which Philip Trevean had found John and Gus Pellas all those years ago. The place was Ravenswood, specifically the driveway entrance to the mansion and estate of "Ravenswood". In the old English tradition, the district was given the name of the dominating property. It made such an impression on me, that I can visualize it in my mind's eye even now, 80 years after the event. The gateway was setback some 20 metres or so. Slanting post and rail fences leading into it, all painted white. The wide, carefully maintained gravel driveway was similarly fenced with well setback post and rail, all painted white.

Dad's main job on the road was to maintain the bitumen surface. There were no blacktop surfaces on highways as we know them today. The bitumen must have been thinner than today's surface, as potholes were always appearing. Dad had to fill those holes and ensure they levelled off to make an even surface. However, at that age, I was hardly interested in the technical aspect of road maintenance. Next to viewing the countryside on the slow trips to and from the daily changing job sites, my main interest was the break for morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea. Dad would mostly boil the billy for lunch, but what I liked was

the cold tea from bottles prepared by Mum before we started out in the morning. I still like a drink of cold tea in the summer. When I retired completely from journalism and started the hobby farm of producing worms for fishermen, my wife Bet made wonderful, sweet cold tea to imbibe as relief from counting worms in a hot tin shed, I don't think my trips accompanying Dad on his road repairing jobs were very frequent. Maybe Dad was baby-sitting me while Mum went to Castlemaine shopping or even when firstly my sister Shirley and then Ivan were born.

Mum and her friend Jessie Jennings took turns driving their horse-and-jinker combinations the 13 kilometres or so to Castlemaine, usually on Fridays, to obtain their week's groceries. We had a flighty pony named Rocky Ned. I accompanied Jessie and Mum one day when it was Mum's turn to do the driving. Shortly after we had left, about a quarter of the way down George Ely's lane, Rocky Ned played up. He reared up on his hind legs and broke into a gallop. Mum had to struggle for a couple of minutes, but eventually controlled him. (A jinker is a light, single-seated, two-wheeled, one-horse form of transport, probably rarely seen these days). When they arrived after each trip, they had to stable the horse in a building behind the historic Castlemaine Market, which now has been restored to its original condition and is now a tourist attraction. I remember one day seeing Grandma Pellas stabling her buggy, a more up-market vehicle, with a hood, whereas the jinker was open to the elements (I should explain that Mum's jinker was vastly different from the house-moving jinker used to transport our home from Maldon. Blame the English language!!! There is also a timber jinker used to transport logs from the forest).

Talking of the market and seeing Grandma there would probably be no coincidence. I am fairly certain that she or Grandpa, or even Uncle Jack had a stall there. When our cows were supplying enough milk for Mum to make excess butter, she sold it through that stall, whoever owned it. We had a special wooden mould the size of the then half-pound (250 gram) butter pat, which left a distinctive, individual pattern, signifying the Pellas brand. Some years later, Mum sold her butter to Cocking's grocery, which helped to pay the weekly food bill.

Previously, I mentioned that Dad was possibly baby-sitting me on his road jobs at times when Shirley and Ivan were being born. We four children were all born in the front bedroom of our home, "Wahroonga". A mid-wife, Nurse Bowyer, lived with us for period, possibly weeks, before the event. By the time Bet (Elizabeth Joy) was born on July 31, 1927, Dad was well and truly finished with road job and was a full-time orchardist. Hence my sojourn at Grandma Pellas's at that time.

chapter three – education- a subject for a book itself

I *f I am going to have chapters in these memoirs, this appears to be the place to start another one. In the hand-written, unfinished, draft of these memoirs, I find the comment, under the heading, Education: "Now that is a subject entitling it to a book in itself." Anyway, I will give it a chapter, at least, to itself.*

I had been at school (Harcourt North, No. 4043) for a couple of years – and loving it – and life in general was on the up and up. The orchard was producing strongly; apples and pears were selling at a good price. Life was good. There was no hint of the World's economic disaster looming over the horizon in a couple of year's time.

School!!! Arguably, the happiest time of my life. Although, come to think of it, I have generally had a very happy life – have always made the best of what life I had. From the very start of school life, I enjoyed learning. Sometimes, I think I would have been better staying at school forever, not as a teacher but as a researcher – an academic, if you like.

From the very first day, I loved school. I could not get there fast enough, each and every day. Of course, I enjoyed school holidays, and if ever I was reluctant to go to school, it was the first day after the Christmas break.

I must admit, ruefully, that I became a bit of a teacher's pet. I was the first to volunteer for such chores as cleaning the blackboard, which most of the other pupils regarded as punishment. Consequently, I was not looked upon with any favour in the classroom, particularly when I regularly, if not always, came top in all my exams.

However, it was different in the playground, where I was able to hold my own at football (Australian Rules – commonly called Aussie Rules these days) and cricket. At cricket, specially, I was usually elected captain of one of the "pick-up" teams. The opposing captain was usually Jack Jennings, son of my parents' friends, Jessie and Charlie Jennings. We took turns in selecting (picking-up) other school-mates to complete our respective teams. There was usually barely enough boys to make the two teams. Jack went on to represent the Harcourt district teams in both cricket and football. My only other claim to fame in the sporting world was to represent Castlemaine Technical School, a secondary school equivalent to today's high school, in cricket. I actually top-scored against Bendigo Technical School, with six runs to my credit!!! Playing against Bendigo was like Zimbabwe playing against Australia.

The school was very small, just the one classroom, with an anti-room in which we left our schoolbags, coats, etc. Its maximum roll of pupils was approximately 40. When it was approaching that maximum, an additional classroom was added and the staff increased from one teacher to two. Miss Muriel Kent was the first, and thus senior, teacher. Miss Barrett was the new teacher when the extra classroom was added shortly before I graduated to technical school. Miss Kent was a tall, lean, straight-laced, no-nonsense type. She and I got on like a house on fire. I owe her a lot for the good grounding my education received. She boarded for a while, originally, with Miss Trevean, Aunty Olive, as she was known to me, because she was my grand-mother's sister.

Aunty Olive lived in a home built of granite blocks hewn from Blight's quarry where Grandpa Pellas sometimes worked. Her orchard property was part of Philip Trevean's original orchard. Thus, Aunty and Grandma were neighbours. I think – I should know – that the granite house was the original Trevean homestead. On the few occasions I visited it, I was taken down to the cellar and plied with lovely cool drink which we knew as raspberry vinegar. Being sweet tasting, this was right up my alley. Another sweet treat were the pomegranates on the trees bordering the avenue that led up from Reservoir Road. This avenue was much longer than the one at Hillside, because the homestead (was it too called Hillside??) was built higher up the Mount Alexander foothill.

I hope to refer to more of these granite block homes in the chapters to come, but Miss Kent's domiciliary arrangements have led me astray from the education chapter. In those days, the 1920's, teachers in rural areas had to rely on accommodation being found for them in local homes. In our case, there were no boarding houses or hotels closer than Castlemaine. The cost of motor cars would have been prohibitive on their salary. Not like the present time, when even the pupils own their cars in frequent cases. Miss Barrett boarded, I believe, with the Hankinson family, in a different direction from the school, west of the reservoir, rather than south, as Aunty Olive was.

Throughout my primary education, I always gained more marks than any other pupil. Consequently, I left to go to junior technical school, after completing eighth grade, as dux of Harcourt North State School, No. 4043. My academic ability earned me a scholarship to attend Castlemaine Junior Technical School. I was also the proud recipient, from the state school, of the Merit Certificate. Before that happened, though, I was to pass through a crisis, physically.

Playing football, Aussie Rules, one lunch time when I was in sixth grade, or thereabouts, I landed heavily from taking a mark (a high overhead catch, for Rugby fans). I twisted my right knee – and, at 84 years of age, I have just found out, I damaged the left knee. I have always thought the right knee was thrown out of joint. Anyway, I was carried to Miss Kent, who gave it some treatment, enough for me to hobble home. Ever since then, my right knee has been weak. At the age of 80, I had to undergo surgery for a complete knee replacement. Currently, at the age of 84, I am now booked into hospital in three weeks time, July 26 to be exact, to have the same surgery to the left knee. The necessary X-ray for the coming surgery revealed a bone chip floating in the knee. The specialist's diagnosis states ..."this may represent an old avulsion (tearing away, my interpretation) injury or previous Osgood Schlatter's disease." My medical book says this is a "relatively common but minor disease of children...The patient is more often a boy, a keen sportsman, and commonly between nine and 15 years of age ...The only treatment is time and rest...Up to two months of rest may be required..." These quotes are paraphrased, but, as we shall see, very applicable.

That playground injury led to further complications. As Harcourt was one of the leading apple growing districts in Victoria, if not Australia, apple packing classes were part of the school curriculum. All apples for export were wrapped and packed into standard wooden cases. The classes were held in Mr. Bill McMahon's apple shed, where special benches were made for us to stand at while packing. Like all boisterous boys and girls, we used to run all the way from the school to McMahon's, a distance of about one kilometre. After standing for the hour or more that the class lasted, my knees, particularly the right one,

locked. If I stood with my left leg straight and the right one bent with my foot resting on a low rail of the bench, I would end the class with one leg locked straight and one locked bent. It would take a lot of massaging, trying to bend the one leg and straighten the other before I could even walk back to school, let alone run.

The doctor must have ordered me to bed; I don't remember seeing a doctor, but I ended up bed-ridden for at least two months. I think it was more like three months, but it seemed an eternity to my young mind. It was at this time that I gained my love of reading. One of the orchardists, the Sunday school superintendent at the time, Mr. Dave McFarlane, kept me supplied with books, a kerosene boxful (about 45 litres) at a time. I well remember a Red Indian hero hunter-tracker being featured in an on-going series, as well as several Zane Grey wild-west stories. When I occasionally ran out of books – I was, and still am when I get time, a voracious reader – Mum taught me to knit, as much to keep my hands and fingers active and nimble as any need for me to get a new pair of socks. It was the very devil learning to turn the heels. I soon forgot that trick, but I could still knit plain and pearl.

When the two, possibly three, months were up I had to re-learn to walk, but I never had my knees lock again. I had to catch up on my school learning, but I had little trouble in doing that or in regaining my walking and running skills. The apple-packing lessons were not all downhill, though, because, on my return to them, I won first prize for that achievement at the Royal Victorian Agricultural Show. I shared the prize with Harcourt North classmate, Joyce Ford. Two years later, my sister, Shirley, gained the same prize. For my prize, I had to pack at the Harcourt Cool Store, probably because the show is regularly held in September, when the only apples available at that time were those held in cold storage. The packing benches there had no lower rail for me to put my foot on, thus eliminating the risk to having a locked knee, not that I think it would have occurred in any case. I well remember being the last to finish packing my case, last by some 30 or 40 minutes, always the perfectionist, often much to my detriment throughout the years. I remember, too, one of my classmates and a good friend, Ken Jones, teasing me as they all waited for me, impatiently, to finish. When I won the prize, I thought to myself that I had the last laugh on Ken. I didn't tell him that, though.

Incidentally, my sister-in-law, Ivan's wife Ethel, when recently talking about my bed-ridden sojourn, remembered that those socks I knitted were ultimately sold at church or school fete. I don't think my father was very impressed with the knitting episode. But he was impressed with the apple-packing prize.



Having gained the merit certificate on completion of primary school, and having qualified for a scholarship to higher education, I was ready for secondary school. Theoretically, I had two choices – or, rather, my parents had these choices – I was not consulted. It would have to be high school, where the would-be professionals attended, or technical school, where the had-to-be-trades people attended. I remember preliminary discussions and debates about that choice. Once again, I was not involved. Those were the days when young people were to be seen but not heard. In any case, I did not know what I wanted to be, except vaguely, and unacceptably to my father, I well knew, to be a photographer; perhaps, although I was unaware of the term at that time, a photo-journalist.

The reason for knowing Dad would not consider my being a photographer involved a travelling photographer. Two or three years before the time in question, this traveller called from house to house, orchard to orchard, much like a door-to-door salesman. (Or, indeed, as our gypsy-like Indian hawker, with his covered wagon, did. But that is a story in itself, as you will see later. It was the height of the world depression, when gold-plated businesses were going bust, let alone studios where the taking of portraits was too expensive for all but the wealthiest. So some of these studio proprietors took to the road in an endeavour to keep doing what they did best.

When this photographer called at Wahroonga, Mum produced a photo of Dad in his soldier's uniform. I still have that original, or, rather, daughter Wendy has that postcard size picture. The photographer persuaded Mum to let him make an enlargement, about 50 centimetres in height, and mount it in an oval gilt frame. I do not know what it cost, but Dad blew his top. Maybe it was only the cost that caused the trouble, but to an 11 or 12 years old boy, it was the photographer, the photo itself, and the circumstances surrounding the occasion that killed my chances of studying to be a photographer. Incidentally, Wendy has, and treasures, that framed enlargement, as well as that small original.

So, the debate about my further education progressed without my involvement. I remember a visit to our home by one of the aristocrats of our orchard district, Harry Ford. He was the father of the lass Joyce with whom I shared that Royal Show first prize for apple packing. He was also one of three brothers who owned a combined large estate of apple orchards and on Mount Barker, the northern extension of Mount Alexander, grazing land, for sheep, mainly. Harry was all for making me a surveyor. Maybe the choice was influenced by my ability with mathematics. Two or three years later, I was to register 100% in trigonometry. In any case, for the same exam, a 22 years old apprentice failed to register any marks. When marking the exam, the teacher, Ray Birkett, wrote on his papers "None, a brilliant effort for one so young."

Alternatively, Harry Ford had an eye to the future when the grazing lands would be subdivided into 50 acre lots, hoping I would do the surveying on discount. Ultimately, Dad decided his sons would be electricians. Electricity was the coming power in the world, he had never heard of electronics! Actually, his reasoning was very successful in Ivan's case. For me? That was a different story that remains to unfold in the pages ahead...

So, the decision being made, I took my scholarship off to junior tech to make my way in the world of electricity.

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This second stage of my education started as a shock, a revelation, a complete change of environment. The shock came, on reflection, from a claustrophobic effect. I did not realise it at the time, and only came, now, as I reflect on the situation. From the wide open spaces of our rural area, buildings were jammed one against another. At 4043, boys had an acre of schoolyard for 25 or 30, at most, to play in. Even the girls, says he, chauvinistically, had half an acre of playground. In summer, we boys played cricket in a tree-lined paddock of about five acres, between the fenced-off girl's playground and the school's pine plantation. At junior tech, "playtime" became "recess", and recess became restrictive movement, as individual space on the so-called "playground" was limited to about a square metre. There was no space for cricket or football.

Closeness of contact led to my one and only physical fight during my school career. Most of us had school caps, with the school badge embroidered in coloured cotton. Some parents, obviously, could not afford to buy them. Depending on the capless boy's personality, this led to furious resentment. One such boy – I'll call him Ted – knocked my cap off and used it as a football. I was not going to allow this, and I attacked him. Other students separated us and escorted the two of us around to the traditional fight site, yelling "fight...fight...fight". The site was a confined area between the rear of the town hall and the school incinerator along the school's back fence. From memory, we probably finished level on points. I scored points through boxing technique learnt at Boy Scouts; Ted scored points through brute strength. Both of us had to front the school principal, then known as headmaster, Bob Adams. A strange co-incidence years later evolved for Ted. Dad employed him on the orchard. Or was it co-incidence? Had Dad heard of the "have-not cap" attitude which could have started the fight? I have read, in the last two years of a current interstate cricketer coming from Castlemaine, hoping it could be one of Ted's descendants.

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To get to junior tech involved an early start to the day. I had a train to catch at 7.30. So, when we heard the Thompson's Foundry whistle blow in Castlemaine at 7.00 (yes, we heard it most mornings at that distance) I had to hop on my bike to ride to Harcourt. I was the only tech student from Harcourt, but I used to meet on the train the two Gillette brothers from Ravenswood. The train journey only took 15 minutes; the tech school was only 10 minutes walk from the station, so we arrived at school at 8.00. To fill in time, we and other early birds played cards. Card-playing, as we practiced it, was not at a table; but by flicking cards up against a brick wall. The card closest to the wall was the winner, the owner scooping up all the other cards each throw. Cards were not the usual playing-cards, but pictures of cricket and football heroes, and treasured as such.

The return train trip, if memory serves me rightly, began at 3.45 . It was known at home as the "four o'clock" when we heard it across the valley pulling up Porcupine Hill.

We three boys waited at the spot where the engine stopped as it pulled into Castlemaine. Steam engines, as they all were in those days, were a fascination for us, as probably they still are for boys the world over. After a while, the engine drivers got to know us. Occasionally, they allowed one of us to travel home "on the footplate" in the engine. We took it in turns, the Gillette boys enjoying a longer ride, all the way to Ravenswood.

Occasionally, too, we turned into little villains, water fighting the whole way to Harcourt. When we were the only passengers in the carriage, it turned into a battleground. The water was obtained from the drinking fountain at the end of each corridor. I cannot remember what the "bombs" were made of, but they held water. They may have been paper bags or ice-cream cartons known in Victoria as Dixies.



Almost daily, on the bike trip to the train, I would pass granite quarry workers heading to work in the opposite direction. There would be three or four of them travelling together, also on bikes. We cyclists all had special tracks on our gravel roads to avoid the frequent potholes. We would weave all over the road in our individual choice of track. One morning, down George Douglas's lane, near Johanson's house, one of the quarry workers and I chose the same track. It had disastrous results. Being downhill for me, I was going hell-for-leather when the quarry workers rounded the slight bend at Johanson's. Of course, being uphill for them, they were head down making hard work of it. They were strung out across the road.

The crash came fairly quickly. Instead of keeping to my middle of the road track, I swerved to the left to be on the correct side of the road. Nobody was seriously injured, but my bike was un-rideable. I think the people opposite Johanson's drove me to the station and held the bike to be picked up later. There was no card-playing that day after arriving at Castlemaine. I walked down to Robertson's butcher shop; where Uncle Rob was preparing to open the shop. I asked him if I could use the phone. When I got through to Mum, it all became too much for me. I burst into tears. Uncle Rob took the phone from me, and, eventually, I was able to explain the problem.

Dad drove me to the train for a couple of weeks. He had brought the bike into "Chicka" Paul's bike shop which was near Robertson's butchery. For those two weeks, I haunted "Chicka's" until I was able to repossess the repaired bike. Strangely, I had another bike crash involving another quarryman, or someone closely related to one. This happened soon after I started as a junior draughtsman with the State Rivers and Water Supply office in Castlemaine. This was potentially far worse, because there was a motor car involved.

I was riding home with Stan Warren, a road maintenance worker – much like Dad was in his early days – living at Harcourt and working in Castlemaine. We had just negotiated the Skew Bridge, so-named because the Calder Highway parallel to the railway skewed under the railway and continued parallel on the opposite side.

As we were riding up the hill, a car driven by one of the Armstrong's, of Harcourt, topped the hill. As it did so, it crossed the road and headed for Stan and me. Fortunately, we were able to cross quickly over the road shoulder and on to a flat verge some 20 metres wide. There was no great damage or injury, but it was a near thing. I seem to remember we were able to continue riding home.



Uncle Rob's wife, Aunty Lizzy, featured prominently in the tech school stage of my education. I would walk over to Aunty Lizzy's for lunch, about 15 minutes each way. I don't remember when, how or why this procedure started. Perhaps it originated from the time of the bike crash. The journey involved travelling past Castlemaine High School, which was bordered by a privet hedge. In bloom, to me, the hedge took on an obnoxious smell; I would run past it as fast as I could. Then came the Western Reserve, where the tech school played cricket and football. After that came the bridge over Forest Creek, of gold-mining fame, and which was the original name of Castlemaine.

Pine trees separating the creek from the street harboured magpie nests, creating the second obnoxious pest past which I had to run the gauntlet. I am, naturally a bird lover, magpies in particular, but not when they are nesting. At breeding time, they attack the unwary traveller. I received a nasty peck on the ear a couple of times from those Forest Creek inhabitants. As a short-cut, I edged along the bank of a subsidiary creek joining Forest Creek from the right. The main creek banks had been lined with slate slabs to form walls some 50 or 60 metres apart to support the street on one side and lawn tennis courts on the other. This tributary had remained just as the original miners left it. The bank was closely fenced, so negotiating the rough terrain made the end of my lunchtime journey fairly hazardous.

Aunty Lizzy lived in the last house, nearest the creek, in Britton Street, which ran at right angles to the creek. It was the last street before the railway line. On the rare occasion when we travelled by train to Melbourne, we watched out and waved to Aunty Lizzy, standing on her back porch.

Aunty took in boarders. One, Wally Fink, a Swiss, had a single room "sleepout", separate from the house, in the backyard. He was an amateur artist. I well remember him at his easel on the bank of the Res finishing a painting. I thought it was fabulous, but he wasn't satisfied, and tore it to shreds.

The boarders ate in the kitchen, which was very narrow, about eight two metres wide, at most, and not much longer, with a wood-fire stove at the end. The table was narrow, too, hard up against the inner wall. How three boarders – Wally, Ted Woods, Dick Ford – and Uncle Rob fitted around it remains an unsolved mystery. I never saw Aunty sit down during my lunchtime visits – or at any other time, come to think of it. She always looked hot, and tired, from cooking.

Another boarder was Tommy Knighton, but he must have come after my lunch-time trips. When I progressed to senior technical school level, I entered the realm of night-time examinations. Quite often, then, I would sleep at Aunty's, and I would share a bedroom with Tommy. Years later, in the Army during the war, Tommy was the chief cook at Headquarters Company. We were based at Darwin at the time. He became so highly regarded, he was promoted to cook for the officer's mess. However, Tommy could not read or write. He came to me to read letters from - and write letters to - Aunty Lizzy.



Going back to my senior school days, by this stage, I was riding my bike to school and to Aunty's. If my exam was on a Thursday night, when I arrived back, after the exam finished, Uncle Rob would be playing crib, a card game. Every Thursday night, Uncle Rob and a

regular group of cronies would meet for a game. I loved to play crib – still do – but I was never invited to join. They sat around the dining-room table, which was much larger than the kitchen equivalent.

My junior tech education presented no great problems and I finished each of the two years as dux of the school. As such, my name went up in gold letters on the school's honour board. I wonder if they are still there 70 years later. There were two minor hiccups, which may prove of interest.

The first involved a teacher named Murray. He taught clay modelling (at which I was hopeless) and solid geometry. It must have been the latter subject in which the controversy rose. Specific gravity was the point in question. Murray quoted the example of cream floating on milk to prove the point. Now, I was responsible, more often than not, for separating cream from milk. At home, we had a separator, a machine for doing just that. It was set to provide very thick cream, which was how we preferred it. I just could not visualize that a quantity of very thick cream could float on an equal quantity of thin, light milk. And I said so. I argued my case strongly and left the classroom unconvinced. Maybe if teacher Murray had used the example of oil floating on water, it would have been more feasible to me. I didn't know much about oil!!!

The second hiccup centred on the subject of English. It occurred in the mid-year exams. Previously, English had been one of my strongest subjects. This exam resulted in a mark of 49 out of 100, failing to pass by just one mark. At this distance in time, I cannot account for it. But there it was.

At the first English class after the exam, the teacher, Cavill by name (possibly miss-spelt), clouted me on the ear as punishment, and possibly in frustration. Dad was furious when I told him. I suspect he had a few words with Mr. Cavill when next he was in Castlemaine. Two years later, when I was in senior tech, Cavill singled my essay out as an example of excellence. He called me out in front of the class to read aloud the entire essay. As my first acknowledged girl friend, Dorothy Birch, was in the class, it made my day (I did have an un-avowed, un-acknowledged, secret-from-everybody, girl friend, Gwen Jones, in primary school...it probably wasn't as secret as I thought: Gwen, for one, like all the feminine gender, would have read my not-so-secret emotions like an open book).

The mid-year crisis in junior tech was never repeated and English remained one of my strongest subjects, if not the very best.

As a side-light, or an aftermath, I sought out Mr. Cavill after my war service. Dissatisfaction with my role in life was growing steadily at this time, as will be disclosed in detail later. Part of that dissatisfaction, early on, led me to study Matriculation English at Melbourne Institute of Technology, which I passed at the ripe age of 28. I had some idea of matriculating for university study. Family needs – and an unhappy wife – put paid to that. However, I learned that Mr. Cavill was teaching at a college in Melbourne on a similar level to M.I.T. I think it was the Emily McPherson College for Girls. With a misguided attempt at gaining advice, I sought him out. He failed to remember me, and had no advice to give.

chapter four – intermission

Perhaps I will call this chapter “Intermission”, because my education came to a temporary halt after I completed my junior tech school study. I had just turned 15 when I received the Junior Technical Certificate, the equivalent of modern days High School Certificate, with very high marks. By today's standards, I would have been entitled to enter university.

Dad had weathered the worst of the world-wide Great Depression by doing the work of three men: working two orchards miles apart, with a mountain between them, and being a transport contractor. He must have thought he had earned a break. He pulled me out of technical school to help him on the orchard. My cousin Geoff, Uncle Herman's son, had suffered the same fate. His education finished at junior tech level, after he, too, had been dux of the school. So, if the school still exists, his name appears on the honour board a couple of years above mine. Apparently that was the thinking of the day: junior tech provided sufficient practical learning.

Dad's brief life as a transport contractor, lasting probably five years at most, began when he won a contract to deliver cement “over the mount”. Driving his 1927 Chevrolet truck, the Capitol model, he picked up the cement from Harcourt railway station. Each load was taken over Mount Alexander, a distance of some 12 kilometres, to a waterworks job. The cement was used to line the channel carrying water from Malmsbury Reservoir to supply Bendigo. This was one project devised to provide employment for the Depression's hosts of unemployed from all walks of life. Hitherto, the water channel – known colloquially as “the race”, had been a dirt ditch, the section being concreted bordered a run-down orchard. The owner was a farmer – more a station owner with a large property – who was dabbling in tobacco growing. Dad leased the orchard from him. I don't know what financial arrangement was involved, if any. Dad marketed all the fruit and I guess the owner, having his grazing property to manage, with the tobacco interest to play with, wasn't all that very concerned with the product of a failing orchard.

The orchard was unusual, in that it was a strip only two to four rows wide, varying with the terrain, and about two kilometres long. Probably, the narrowness and length were arranged to take full advantage of seepage from the then open dirt ditch which constituted the water channel. All the fruit trees were on the downhill side of the channel, at the foot of Mount Alexander, on the Sutton Grange side.

The fruit trees were of the widest variety I had known. Besides the usual apples and pears common in Harcourt orchards on the other side of the mountain, there were peaches, nectarines, apricots and figs. It was no wonder the assortment proved too attractive to one Barkers Creek scoundrel. Goodness knows how he got to know of the goodies available on the other side of the mountain from his home, some 16 kilometres away. But there he was, with a horse and jinker, laden with our fruit which he had helped himself to. He was a fiery redhead, whom I later played cricket against, with a nickname of "Rip". I don't know if the name originated from his habit of ripping off people or his fast bowling against opposing batsmen. Regardless of those details, Dad "ripped" into him verbally with the most colourful language I had ever heard him use.

One fig tree was huge, about 30 feet high and about twice that width. We kids climbed all over it, picking – eating the occasional one, two, or three – ripe figs for Mum. She would make them into jam – fig and ginger, or fig and clove – which became my favourite spread, with thick cream. On our trips with Dad "over the mount", we kids were fascinated by, and fearful of, a bend on the downhill side after we had cleared the Gap on the outward journey. We labelled it the Devil's Elbow. There was a sharp dip immediately before and immediately after the bend, necessitating, particularly when loaded, for the truck to be in low gear.

An out-of-work Englishman was employed to work on the Sutton Grange orchard. He lived – if you could call it living – in a wooden, unlined hut, with dirt floor and a bark roof. Even so, he was one up on the sustenance men, as the water channel workers were called. They had to live in tents. George, as Dad's English employee was called, accompanied Dad and me to Castlemaine one Christmas Eve. Apparently, Dad had left it to the last minute to buy presents for us kids. It was late in the day when we started. The truck's tail-light had failed; thunderstorms were threatening, so Dad swung a bull's-eye lantern, which had a red eye on one side, at the end of the truck tray. George had ridden his bike over the mount and Mum had given him a cooked "Christmas" dinner before we started. George and his bike sat on the open tray for the journey. Halfway home from the 'Maine, the predicted thunderstorm, complete with pelting rain, lightning and thunder, hit us. I can remember the exact spot on the route: it was near Hogarth's house, some six or seven kilometres from home.

The windscreen was Dad's only protection from the heavy, slanting downpour. George and I had none. It was before Dad had a custom-built, cabin made of flat galvanized iron. I was sitting alongside Dad, facing the front. George was marginally better off. He turned his back on the elements, for we were travelling straight into a howling northerly gale, which Central Victoria was frequently subject to in thundery conditions. I huddled as close to Dad as possible. I don't know how he continued to drive. These days, I would have stopped, even if I had the protection of a sedan roof overhead. Driving lights on the old Chev were weak by today's standards. They were rendered superfluous, however, by the almost continuous lightning. Thunder drowned the noise of the engine, as surely as the virtually horizontal rain was drowning us.

By the time we reached the crossroads a kilometre from home, the storm had eased from a driving rain (in undrivable conditions) to a steady downpour. To finish his Christmas Eve journey, George was faced with pushing his bike, without a light, in heavy rain, over the mount, back to his hut, 10 kilometres further. George, also sometimes known as "Tommy the Pommy", insisted on doing just that. Talk about "mad dogs and Englishmen going out in the midday sun"; the same applied, in this case, to "mad dogs ...in the midnight rain". Dad fixed the spluttering lantern to his bike and off he went. I hope he had restful Christmas Day. My role as assistant orchardist involved helping Dad with apple picking, grading and packing. Seasonally, after that, it was pruning, which I was never any good at. I couldn't get the hang of differentiating between leaf and fruit buds. I am better at pruning roses, maybe because I had to teach myself around roses. Dad was a very impatient teacher, or, maybe, I was a very slow learner when it came to practical farming, despite my present love of gardening.

Next in the year's routine was ploughing. (The computer is asking me to spell it "plowing". I was always good at spelling, the English way, compared with ploughing any way, English or American). Our ploughs were all horse-drawn in those days. Later, on our orchard, as elsewhere, they were tractor driven. Our horse, a Clydesdale named Bloss, did not understand my Australian language at all. Despite his bad leg, Dad was proud of the straight furrows he ploughed, which were as straight at the end of the day, when he limped home, as they were when he was fresh. I only lasted one day of crooked, hit-and-miss furrows. I also helped with spraying the fruit trees. Spraying involved a horse-driven, two-wheeler with a 400 litre sump surmounted by a petrol engine directly connected to a pump from which 10 metre hoses ended with spray guns. Bloss would automatically start pulling from one tree and stop at the next at Dad's command - a kind of 1hp automatic-gear vehicle long before automatic motor-car vehicles were invented!

One of the sprays we used, copper sulphate, turned the water blue; another, lime sulphur, turned the water yellow. There were two hoses emanating from the pump, so Dad sprayed one side of the tree and I sprayed the other. By the end of the day, my clothes, hands and face were blue or yellow all over. Dad, tactlessly, or maybe deliberately, said: "Jack Jennings could spray all day and not get a spot of spray on himself." Now, Jack and I excelled in physical activities. As I have said earlier, inevitably, we were captains of opposing school cricket teams, we had been elected leaders of the two patrols in our Boy Scout troop, and were equal rivals at knot-tying and boxing training. So, Dad's criticism cut me to the quick. I thought to myself at the time, and often later: Jack could not have been spraying properly.



Dad was helping prune Grandpa Pellas's orchard, because Uncle Jack, who lived his whole life at "Hillside", was concentrating on turning the property into a dairying industry. On this day, I was sent by myself to prune the older section of Grandpa's orchard, well away from the "Hillside" homestead. Lo, and behold, sex raised its glorious head. I never agreed with the saying, at the time in question, that sex raised its *ugly* head. Although I lived on a farm, with cows calving, mares delivering colts and fillies, I was unaware of how this came about. Dad had never explained about the birds and the bees - never a word, never a hint. Actually, he was unapproachable about such subjects, had I a mind to question him. I may have been top of my class, top of my school in all subjects for years, but I was totally ignorant of the ways of the world.

There I was, in the middle of an orchard, supposedly working, when the male physical manifestation of sex made itself evident. I viewed it, I felt it, with the normal pulsating result. Gradually, those dirty jokes prevalent on the playground of junior tech started to make sense. As I said, I couldn't mention the phenomenon to Dad, and boys, in those days, could not discuss matters of that nature with their mothers. However, from that day onward, I was sold on sex. If solo sex was that good, the real male-female sex must be out of this world. I always had an eye for the girls, but I didn't do anything practical about it for another four or five years. As the year progressed, Dad became convinced that I would never become an orchardist. I suspect Mum was a strong influence in convincing him. So, before the year's end, I was back at senior tech. I don't remember doing any study, but familiarizing myself with class times, class rooms and class mates.

Apart from this interlude, or intermission, in my educational life, there are many factors that influenced my school years. They included such aspects as Boy Scouts and the Great Depression, both of which I have already touched on, but need much more detail. However, I will continue, at this point, with the final stage of my education, because I think it is one of the most important phases in my, or anyone's, life.

chapter five - electricity and magnetism

Evidently, Dad had settled on an electrical career for me. Albeit, Harry Ford's preference, surveyor, could have been fulfilled by doing the same course. Indeed, as I have already mentioned, Ivan, pursuing the same course, did some practical surveying.

Having enrolled for the electrical diploma course at Castlemaine Senior Technical School, I found myself in a class of six students. That number declined subsequently, I think in the second year, by the death of two students. This, in itself, was a strange happening, but it started just after we had a social night out. A happy group, we had been invited by our mathematics teacher, Ray Birkett, to have dinner at his home. The dinner lived up to all our expectations, and we had a pleasant, jovial evening, enjoyed by all.

It was a sudden, sad shock, then, to learn when arriving at school not long afterwards, that one of our numbers, Norman (Bing) Archer had died. We soon learned that Bing's death was a matter of suicide, if I remember rightly, a gunshot wound. His death was followed shortly afterwards by the death of a fellow student, Bing's best friend, Keith Robinson. So far as I knew, Keith was in the best of health. Coming so soon after the suicide of his close friend, his demise was, and still remains, a mysterious coincidence. Class numbers were augmented by Thompson Foundry staff planning on becoming design engineers and/or design draftsmen.

One highlight – or lowlight, depending on one's point of view – happened in my first year. The subject was "electricity and magnetism"; the teacher was an otherwise lovable character, Gus McCleod.

The point at issue was "fundamental principles". I had asked Gus what a fundamental principle was. The answer was: "A fundamental principle is one that is fundamental." To one that excelled in English, that was stating the obvious. However, as one with a similar expertise in English, I should have understood the meaning of "fundamental". One definition, in Webster's Dictionary, interprets "fundamental" as:

"Applies to that upon which everything else in a system, institution or the like, is built up or by which the whole is supported, or from which each addition is derived and without which, therefore the entire construction would collapse."

There you are; I should have known that, shouldn't !!!!

Anyway, fundamentals aside, I always managed to gain to marks in all my examinations, be they mid-year or end-of-year. The only subject in which I gained the perfect mark, 100 out of 100, was one of the mathematics. It probably was not calculus, in which I struggled. It was probably trigonometry, or even solid geometry.

In any case, I distinctly remember one of the foundry part-time students gained not a single mark for the very same subject. The teacher, the afore-mentioned Ray Birkett, marked his paper: "None- a brilliant effort for one so young". The student in question being at least five years older than us, and, at that stage, being a fully employed foundry draftsman. Ray Birkett was one teacher who treated all students as equals.

I did not take to the school principal, Mr. King, who taught applied mechanics. He was never known, by the students, as anyone other than "Mitter King" – he stuttered, and the name came out occasionally as "Mitter King". He also taught engineering drawing, which I rather liked, and was rather good at, particularly lettering.

When I first started senior tech, I travelled by train. As usual, I arrived at school long before the doors were open. With one or two other early arrivals – the brainy class member, Bing, also travelled by train from Maldon – I was wont to sit on a balustrade bordering the steps leading to the front door. Across the street, right opposite the school, was Beck's Hotel. The publican, Reg Beck, was a highly skilled, far above average, violinist. Many were the mornings when he entertained us while we waited for the school doors to open. This was my first experience of listening to violin music, and I have loved it ever since. I never miss an opportunity to listen to violin concertos by Beethoven and Bruch, to name but a couple.

Incidentally, some seventy years later (2004), that same hotel – Beck's – features in a television series called "Blue Heelers". At the start of each program, usually, a photograph of Beck's Hotel appears in a montage of other photos allied to the series.



It was at senior tech that I met my first girl friend. I have mentioned elsewhere that we shared English classes. Most called her "Dot", but she preferred to be called by her full name of Dorothy.

A group of girls used to congregate at the rear of the school during breaks between classes and at lunch time. We boys exchanged cheeky remarks. One saucy lass, Kathy, caught my eye. However, Kathy paled into insignificance once I met Dorothy in the classroom. Dorothy was not of the backyard group.

The Birch family lived on the outskirts of Castlemaine, in an area known as Knight's Hill, which was also on my way home to Harcourt North. Mr Birch was gold prospector, frequenting bushland at the rear of their small property. He apparently made enough of a living to send his daughter to tech, which, in her case, was of higher secondary school level. Reputedly, the Birches were closely related to Reg Ansett, the founder of Ansett Airlines. Dorothy was fond of telling me the story of Ansett starting with running buses between Ballarat and Melbourne.

When I started riding my bike to school, Dorothy and I rode home together, I deviated the kilometre or so from the Calder Highway to see her to her home on the edge of the bushland. When our night examinations coincided, long were the night-time farewells at the gate leading a short distance uphill to her home. (Some examinations were held at night for the convenience of part-time students, such as foundry workers. In this way, they avoided any loss of pay incurred by attending examination dates unscheduled at the beginning of the year).

The same bike rides together occurred when we both started to work. I was employed at the State Rivers and Water Supply, which had an office in the Castlemaine Post Office, on Barker Street, one of the two main commercial streets. Dorothy was employed in the office

of a stonemason, George Ferris, two blocks down Barker Street. On the few occasions I visited her there, I was fascinated by the polishing of granite that had been quarried in the rough at Harcourt.

We were being recognised as a couple. So much so, that Mum organized a picnic in the pine plantation that bordered the western foothills of Mount Alexander. The picnic was arranged for Dorothy to meet the rest of my family.

Early in my employment, the senior tech put on a school dance. Ivan had started junior tech, and, together, we attended the dance. Towards the end of the dance, one of the foundry students, Colin Wells, said he wanted to see me outside. When we were in the school lane, he immediately – and strongly – objected to my attention being paid to Dorothy. At this stage, I had no idea he was interested in her. It appeared that his elder brother was going with her elder sister, Elsie. Through his brother, Colin had met and become interested in Dorothy.

The conversation became heated on his part, and he started swinging his fists. I remained cool. The boxing lessons I had received in Boy Scouts stood me in good stead. As he bored in with flailing fists, I let loose a couple of uppercuts. End of fight! This was only my second fight on school property – or anywhere – and it was my last.

Word must have spread fast, or my dishevelled appearance told the tale. In any case, the dance was ended for me. I think Dorothy stayed the night with a girl friend in Castlemaine. The relationship was decidedly cool for a while, though it soon regained its natural tempo. Some time later, probably a year or so, we both changed jobs. I remained in Castlemaine, at the State Electricity Commission, but Dorothy got a job in Melbourne. We must have kept in touch; I don't remember how – letters probably. There came a time when Dorothy returned home. By this time, I had my own car, courtesy of Dad.

On the first occasion we were to meet, Dorothy asked me to take her to the Winch property, an orchard between Harcourt and Ravenswood. She was friendly with Ruby Winch, in particular, and her two sisters, Joyce and Dot. One of the sisters was going with, and eventually married, Frank Adams, the son of the junior tech principal, Bob Adams.

Dorothy must have been staying the night with the Winch family because I dropped her off at the house gate. Before that, however, we talked about our experiences-hers in Melbourne, mine in Castlemaine and, more recently in Kyneton. The conversation, naturally, turned to our relationship. Dorothy said, in effect, "There is more to love, I've learnt, than kissing and cuddling." Up to this stage, I had no more experience with love than just that-kissing and cuddling. I immediately tried to rectify that inexperience, and met with a rebuff. The rebuff was final and led to the parting of the ways.

Oh! One experience I failed to mention- skinny-dipping. Early on in our relationship, one hot summer day, Dorothy and her brother, Guy, asked me if I would like to go swimming. To my reply that I had no swimming costume, they replied: "That's all right, we go in the nuddy" So, we traipsed off to a small dam in the bush behind their home. It was all very circumspect. Dorothy entered the dam first until the water was shoulder high. She turned her back towards us as Guy and I entered. There was no physical contact and so ended, for me, a very tame, skinny-dip.

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Returning to the education saga, now...

I had topped the senior tech in the final exams for my first two years. So, I had my name on the two honour boards, junior and senior tech, twice on each. For some unknown reason, Dad stopped my education one year short of obtaining my Electrical Engineering Diploma. Given the choice, I would have gone on forever being a student. I loved being at school, learning, so much. I probably would have ended up being a researcher of some

description, given the chance at that stage. Maybe, Dad considered I was old enough at 17 to earn my own living. A vacancy for a junior draftsman came up at the State Rivers and Water Supply.

That ended Stage Three of my education.

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During the war, I was known as an inveterate letter writer. I wrote, at least, one letter each week. They were written to Mum, Melva (my wife at the time) and Aunty Lizzie, on behalf of Tommy Knighton, as mentioned elsewhere.

One example of the troops' knowledge of my letter-writing occurred at a Bren-gun carrier driving school at Cranbourne, in Victoria, near the bayside suburb of Frankston. The school was being conducted by the officer-in-charge of the transport platoon, Captain Brown. One weekend some four or five members of the fledgling carrier platoon, asked me, the platoon sergeant, if it would be alright if they took off for Bendigo, their home town, some 160 kilometres north of camp. I could not give them official leave or official permission. As there were no duties applicable to them, I said I would cover for them. Coming back from Bendigo, they were hitch-hiking. Who should pick them up but Captain Brown! He was quite congenial, thinking it a great joke. There were no repercussions. The four or five troops involved came to me, telling the story and suggesting I should write it up. I never did.

Another time, the platoon's villain, whom I was hard pressed to control, was driving a carrier in the Northampton area of West Australia. He bogged the carrier alongside the railway line. To get out of the bog, he waited for a train to appear. Stopping the engine, he hitched a rope onto it, and ... abracadabra ... the carrier was hauled to firmer ground. The villain went to great pains to tell me the story, hoping that I would write it up.

Then, years after the war, I applied for a newspaper job. The editor was none other than the intelligence sergeant of the battalion, Bob Loudon. In his intelligence capacity, he would have censored a large proportion of my letters. Thus, he knew I could write and I got the job.

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All of this does concern my education, stage 4.

After discharge from the army, I felt at a loose end – a common experience among ex-servicemen. I had married Melva early in my war service; so, although I felt unsettled, I also felt it was essential that I earn a living.

The position of electric meter tester with the State Electricity Commission had been held open for me. To refresh and further my knowledge, I was sent to Meter and Tests Department of the S.E.C. in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond. The building was close to the Yarra River, where the railway bridge to the southern suburbs crossed the river. The Rosella food preserving works adjoined the other side of the tracks. The smell of tomato sauce being cooked remains with me to this day.

Much as I enjoyed the work and comradeship of other meter testers, I still felt like a square peg in a round hole. Endeavouring to do something about making a square hole for myself, I made countless inquiries about educational assistance for ex-servicemen. The answers led me to believe the slow grind of education would put us in a financial situation that would be a strain on our marriage and too much for Melva to bear.

I had my sights set on matriculating for university and a degree lending itself to a literary career. Night study could have achieved that, and I did try it – night study – for one year. I enrolled at Melbourne Institute of Technology to study Matriculation English, passed easily.

However, not once did I receive any encouragement or advice from any direction towards furthering my education. I suppose I could have knuckled down to the long haul of doing a degree by night study. If I remember correctly, that would have been exceptional in those days. Nowadays, it is a common occurrence, as witness the effort of my daughter, Wendy, courageously setting out studying part-time a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Western Sydney. Fortunately, she has the support of her husband and family, and the current trend for life-long education. The trend way back when I had passed matriculation English was vastly different. So, I just gave up my pursuit of further education.

However, in a final desperate attempt to kick-start a literary career, I enrolled for night classes conducted by a noted short-story writer, Alan Aldous. The classes were very left-wing, even a touch communistic. But that was a typical reaction to Bob Menzies' right-wing government of the time. I lasted the best part of a year in that class, but, though sympathetic to the cause, the ideology became too much for me.

That ended my attempt to gain a higher education. Stage 4 was finally closed, never to be re-started or continued to further stages.

chapter six – early childhood

That last stage of my education should possibly been titled Chapter Six, as it became lengthier than expected. However, now that I have got my saga of education out of the way, it's now time go back to my earlier childhood.

As I am reflecting on my childhood, and that of my siblings, I realise that it made us what we are today. I am thinking largely of how those rugged, rural conditions, the open air life, made us fit to withstand all that the advancing years could throw at us. In particular, I am now, at the time of writing, a week away from my 85th birthday. Ivan is now 81. I am recovering well, with regular exercises, from a complete knee replacement... Ivan has pulled through a bout of pneumonia. And I put this down to the work we had to do in the orchard.

For example, there was the job of digging strips. These strips of earth, about 20 to 24 centimetres wide, ran from tree to tree the full length of each row. They were formed by ploughing. Guided by Dad, the plough narrowly missed each tree for the full length of each row, leaving this narrow strip of unturned earth. It was necessary to break the strip up, because it would prevent harrowing, which was done across the ploughing with much lighter equipment than the plough. The strip would prove too hard an obstacle for this process.

Digging strips was a job which fell to Ivan and me. Strips were a half a kilometre long, the length of each row. To our young eyes, at the start of each row, strips would appear endless. But we persevered, and the perseverance built muscles and character. Even so, we used to envy Bill Eagle's cultivation method when we passed his orchard on school days. Bill didn't believe in ploughing!

Before the ploughing and digging of strips, our work, Ivan's and mine, was restricted to raking up cuttings. The fruit trees were pruned just before ploughing was begun. Cuttings were the residue of pruning. They varied in length from about one metre to a few centimetres. We raked them into heaps. When all were heaped, they were carted down to the far end of a paddock, about a kilometre away.

Often, this carting became a slow process. One of the horses was hitched to a sled, which was a platform of floor boards above two logs as runners. Because this was winter time, any

other form of transport was in danger of becoming bogged. At the far end of our paddock, a mile or more from Reservoir Road, the cuttings were piled up in a huge heap. Thus we made ready for Guy Fawkes Night on November 5, the anniversary of the attempt, by a man of that name, in the 19th century, to burn down, or blow up the English Parliament building.

Guy Fawkes Night was really something in Victoria in those days. We children couldn't wait for November 5 to come around. Dad would go into Castlemaine the shopping day before the event and come home with a sugar bag full of crackers and fireworks (about twice as much as a current plastic shopping bag would hold). Sky rockets, Catherine wheels and jumping jacks were Dad's specialty. Uncle Herman's family would join in the fun.

When my wife Bet and I arrived in Sydney during the 1950's, we found it strange that bonfire night was not celebrated on November 5, but fell on Empire Day in the Queen's Birthday holiday weekend. That probably says something about the differing State attitudes to the so-called Mother Country, considering the causes they were celebrating.

chapter seven – post office and other additions

In retrospect, the decade 1927-1935, contrary to the world-wide suffering caused by the Great Depression, was one of progress and financial reliability at Wahroonga. We did have some troublesome times, but overall we went from strength to strength.

Our home was improved by the addition of a combined laundry-bathroom, a dairy, and a large combined apple-shed and stable. All of these gains could be attributed to Dad's foresight in winning the contract to transport cement to the work designed to beat the depression. Until I was about eight years old, I had a bath once a week in a tub. The tub was of heavy gauge, galvanized iron, oval, about a metre long, and about 50 centimetres high. It was placed in front of the kitchen stove, on which the water was heated. In winter, we appreciated the warmth of the fire while getting dry. We took it in turns – Shirley, Ivan and I – to have the bath. I can still feel Mum washing my ears. She was particularly vigorous and vigilant about clean ears.

I do not know if Bet – known as “Betty Kinkles” early in life – suffered the same fate. By the time Bet was ready for the same routine; we probably had the new laundry-bathroom addition. I can remember steps leading up to the kitchen door, which was the back entrance to the house. It was virtually the only entrance, because the front door was rarely used.

We must have had the Harcourt North Post Office at Wahroonga before the renovations took place. I remember Grandpa Pellas, old Bill Eagle and old man Fisher sitting beside the steps on a sofa at ground level, waiting for the mail to arrive. The renovations did away with the steps, being replaced by an earth ramp leading up to the door. So the three old men waited in the kitchen on another sofa.

The renovations also did away with the bath tub in front of the kitchen fire. A cement-brick laundry-bathroom was built adjacent to where the steps used to be. The door of the new addition was close to the kitchen door, so, despite having to step outside the house to have a bath, it was only a matter of a couple of steps. In any case, the additional roof was extended to make a veranda for the full width of the house.

This roof served a double purpose, for it made catchment area to fill the new tank that served as a water supply for the laundry-bathroom. The only problem was we had to carry the water from this tank up the ramp and into the room.

We depended on rain water for all of our household use. The land and the rear section of the roof were too sloped to fit the 2000 gallon tank inside. We were forced to use a tank-stand lower than the floor of the new addition, so as to be able to fit it under the roof. The tank-stand for kitchen use, being on the side of the house, not the rear, and under a higher roof level, was high enough for a tap being extended inside the kitchen wall. Even so, it is my understanding that, originally, all water had to be carted from outside the house. The kitchen tap from the higher tank was only a later innovation.

Another great improvement, introduced at about the same time as the laundry-bathroom, was the construction of a dairy on the opposite side of the ramp. Also of cement-brick construction, it had to be lower down to allow an air space between the dairy roof and the veranda roof. Unlike the other new room, which adjoined the house, a similar air space was provided away from the kitchen. As the back of the house faced the west, this air space, together with the cement-brick construction, was designed to keep off as much of the hot summer afternoon heat as possible.

The kitchen – huge by modern standards – was virtually the living room. The large table would have seated 10 very comfortably, 14 a little less comfortably, and 16 at a pinch. In later years, I would do my homework at one end of the table and Mum would be preparing the dinner, even setting the table, at the other end. It made a beautiful table tennis venue. The kitchen led directly into the post office, as they were the original two back rooms of the house. The Post Master General's Department, or PMG, as Australia Post was then known, required the office to be re-lined with new white sheeting. So the room became the subject of the first renovation, as I knew it. The mail was sorted in there. The telephone, number Harcourt 118, was in there.

The telephone deserves a paragraph to itself. Fixed to the wall at average adult mouth height, it was a wooden contraption about 50 centimetres long. When you wanted to make a call, you had to turn a handle on the side to alert the telephone exchange three miles away down at Harcourt proper. When the telephonist answered, you had to announce the telephone number of the person you wished to call. You did this by speaking into a fixed conical mouthpiece while holding a removable cord-attached earpiece. It was a bit different to a cordless telephone or a mobile you can fit in your pocket!

The younger generation may not be aware of other changes taking place during the period when the PMG became Australia Post. Semi-privatisation has led to the availability of stationery such as greeting cards, computer printing paper, writing utensils, cardboard mailing boxes, etc. Some post offices even sell newspapers. Mind you, we did sell newspapers at Harcourt North Post Office during the 1930's, but that was the exception rather than the rule. We only sold those that were ordered, so you could not just come in, pick up a paper and buy it. Services were limited to selling stamps, receiving and delivering mail. There was not even any mail delivery in post offices the size of Harcourt North. People had to call and pick up their own mail. That was the system as late as the 1960's, when we first came to live in Emu Plains.

There were no mail-boxes scattered through our district, where, in other bigger areas, people wishing to post letters could drop them into these boxes and PMG staff could collect the contents and deliver them to the nearest post office. Those wishing to post letters in our district had to hand them in at our back door or at the door of the post-office room off the kitchen. Stamps for the postage of letters were sold from a cardboard folder with pages separating the various denominations. After checking that the letters handed in were correctly stamped, they were placed in a huge canvas bag. When the bag openings were closed by strong straps, Mum would seal them with sealing wax. This was done by heating a stick of the sealing wax, allowing the melted wax to drip over the strap joint. When sufficient wax was applied, a special Harcourt North seal was pressed into it.

Although officially Dad was the post-master, authorized as such, no doubt, in recognition of his war service, Mum did all the work. Bill Eagle Jr, in his noisy, roaring Lancia car, transported the mail, and the few newspapers to and from Harcourt. We always knew when Bill was out

and about in his car- it had a most distinctive roar. It even woke us up at night when he put his foot down on the accelerator to climb from our gully up the hill to Uncle Herman's. He probably would have been on his way home from Castlemaine Mechanic's Institute (equivalent to NSW's School of Arts), where he was on the committee. He would not have been on his way home from a girl friend. Bill was not a young man like that. He never married.

Writing about the distinctive roar of Bill's Lancia reminds me of one of the few times I went to Castlemaine's agricultural and horticultural show. It would have been in the late 1920's, when Bill had his Lancia. I don't know if it was his car, but one of the same model and colour was engaged in a slalom race on the oval, in and out of a line of sticks. The Lancia burst a tire and the tube came out in a huge red balloon. Whenever I hear of Lancias (I don't think they are in production now), I am reminded of Bill, roaring noise and ballooning tires.

The last of the renovations was also the biggest. Behind the house, about 50 metres away and slightly to one side, Dad organized a huge shed to be built. It was about 30 metres long and about 13 metres wide. One side – nearest the house – became a full length apple shed, about eight metres wide, with a doorway wide enough and big enough to drive a train through (to my eight way of thinking).

The other side was split into three sections. The first became an open milking shed, complete with its own corral-type fence off to the side. The second section became a feed store, where bags of chaff, oats, bran and such like were kept. The third became a stable for the horses. Like the laundry-bathroom and dairy, the shed was of cement brick construction. The builder was a local, Frank Barnes.

It was not long before I found out the reason for the railway-station wide door being installed in the end of the shed. Dad arrived home driving a brand new Chevrolet Capitol model truck. I well remember the amazement and delight at seeing Dad sitting up on the bare chassis in a makeshift driving seat. A flat tray and a noisy tin cabin were added later.

Up to this time, Dad's previous experience with motor vehicles had been driving a T-model Ford belonging to one of the Thomas brothers, Bill or Bob. In this vehicle, the family was driven to Castlemaine. Shirley and Ivan were scheduled to have their tonsils removed. (I don't know why I was excluded – I've still got mine 80 years later). The hospital was then in Mostyn Street, uphill from Barker Street. Dad made a classy U-turn to pull up in front of the hospital. Somehow the speed of the turn must have short-circuited the wiring, because the horn started blaring. Mum was all flustered by the din disturbing the hospital patients and medical staff. Dad eventually found the wire connected to the horn and ripped it off.

The new shed and the new dairy greatly improved our output of dairy produce. Dad was milking three cows at the time and his job was made much easier by the new cow bail, with its cement floor. It was my job to turn the handle of the separator installed in the dairy, which removed the cream from the milk. Mum made the cream into butter, which was sold to a Castlemaine grocer, Mr. Frank Cocking.

chapter eight – the Indian hawker and his dog “Don Bradman”

I t was a red letter day for us kids when Old Shav turned in at our gate. Shav is here... Shav is here", we would shout.

Strangely, I don't remember an occasion when we were at school on the days of Shav's visits. He was old. At least, to us young ones, he appeared old.

His name was Shav Ali. In any case, that was how we knew him. He may have been born with other names in his native India – probably was – but he was endeared to us as Old Shav. He had an over-abundance of beard. He wore a turban. He was tidily dressed and wore those baggy trousers often featured by Indians.

When his caravan stopped in our back yard, the first thing he did was to put a nose-bag of feed on his horse. Then he opened up the side of his caravan. To my impressionable eyes, the covered van – wagon, if you like – was as Indian as its owner, only more so – perhaps Arabian would be a better description. Come to think of it: coupled with his name, Ali, his style of dress and general appearance, Arabian would fit the bill, but, to me, he would always be Indian.

It would always be the left side of the caravan which Shav opened up –literally “up” for the whole side, when propped up, formed a veranda, if there happened to be any rain or excessively hot sun. Maybe the other side of the van, never opened, formed Shav's living quarters.

All the goodies were on the left side. There were drawers full of buttons and buckles, cottons and silk threads, brooches for girls and pocket knives for boys. In larger drawers, there were all sorts of clothing: blouses and dresses, coats and trousers, underwear and pull-overs. Above the drawers were rolls of material, lengths of suit material, dress material and curtain material.

After the glamour of Shav's arrival wore off, and while Mum was entering the bargaining stage, I played with Shav's dog. From my earliest days, I was unafraid of dogs, despite being bitten by one of Uncle Herman's dogs on my way to school. Shav's dog was a Queensland blue heeler cattle dog, a breed with which, usually, one couldn't take chances. But Shav's dog and I were the best of mates.

The business of the morning finished, Mum always gave Shav lunch. Being Indian, Mum thought Shav would like curry. She always made him a curry. Always, when he had finished his meal, Mum would ask him if the curry was to his liking. Always, Shav replied that it was very nice, but it could have been "hotter", meaning that it could have been spicier.

Lunch finished, Shav removed the nose-bag of food from the horse and drove off to continue his round. He worked his way north, past our school, and always ended the day at the Jones's home. Next day, Ken Jones would tell us, at school, how he had teased Shav. "What have you got for dinner, Shav, nice roast beef?" or "... a nice piece of steak?" To Shav, the Indian, cattle were sacred. Cows, in India, had right-of-way in the streets. Nobody would harm a cow. The thought of eating cattle meat was abhorrent to all Indians. I never found out how Shav reacted to the teasing.

Three years passed by. When I was 11 years old, Shav told us this would be his last visit. He had often told Mum that he had a young member of the family, a girl, about the age of my sister Bet (or "Bett", as she signs letters to me now), back in India. That girl in India would have been his grand-daughter, or even his great-grand-daughter, as Bet would only have been four years old at the time. "I am going home to India," he announced, "and I want the boy (indicating me) to have my dog. His name is Don Bradman."

Old Shav was a keen lover of cricket, as most Indian males were – and still are. Don Bradman had recently hit the highest score of 334 at Lords on the Australian's 1930 tour of England. (That record stood for 73 years until it was broken by Mathew Hayden almost exactly a year ago as I write – 380 at Perth on October 9 and 10).

chapter nine – cricket

The game of cricket has featured largely throughout my life; I rather felt I had dealt more fully with this aspect during the transference of the draft copy to the laptop computer. However, after reading through every page, I find only brief references early on in the chapters on education. So, let's fill in the details.

It may not be too much an embellishment to say cricket has been a passion in my life. Maybe that term could only be applied appropriately to my earliest days and my later, more recent, life.

The good Pellas family name – as far as cricket was concerned – apparently stood me in good stead when I started my secondary education. During the summer months, the sport page of the local newspaper, the Castlemaine Mail, listed all the weekend cricket matches in detail.

Consequently, it was more the family name than performances that resulted in my inclusion in technical school teams. However, as mentioned previously, I was chosen in the team to play Bendigo tech. When I progressed to senior tech level, there were insufficient full-time students to field a team.

Instead of school cricket, even at this early age (14 or 15), I was able to join Dad's club team, Brooks, in the Castlemaine District Cricket competition. Even before joining the team, one of the highlights of my cricketing career, such as it was, had been becoming the youngest member of a Pellas team to play the Rest of Brooks. The Pellas team comprised: Uncle Herman and his three sons, Kit (Christian), Maurice and Geoff, the four sons of Uncle Gus, Jack (Crackerjack), Roy, Bill and Claude, Uncle Jack (Kangy), Dad and myself. I don't remember any of the details, who won or lost, but I was a very proud boy to even take the field. Our Pellas team proudly boasted one player, Crackerjack, a fast bowler who had represented the Bendigo District team against the Touring England Test Cricket team.

One minor achievement which I held over a former tech school colleague, and which I never let him forget, happened on Brooks' home ground. Sam Leech, my erstwhile friend, was batting and I was fielding at cover. Sam hit the ball high to my left. I jumped up, threw myself to my left, stuck out my hand and the ball stuck in it. I was proud of that catch, particularly because it dismissed an old school mate.

Cricketers often refer to the playing field as the "paddock". Brooks' home ground was just that- a country paddock, fairly level, but rising slightly at one end towards the junction of two creeks, or brooks, as we players obviously liked to call them.

Under the pressure of school work, new employment and the counter-attraction of girl friends, my active participation in cricket gradually waned. However, the achievements of Don Bradman and the Aussie Test teams maintained my keen interest in the game. Then the war intervened (I spent my 21st birthday in Army camp), marriage intervened, return to employment and housing difficulties intervened. I never got back to playing cricket. When the Packer-TV-inspired one day circus erupted, I did not favour it, I disapproved, but gradually the closeness of the contests stirred my interest again.

The only time I would have seen Bradman in the field would have been in the Melbourne Test of 1932. Uncle Herman took Geoff and I on a one-day visit to the big smoke. I suppose he drove us down, but it wouldn't have been an easy trip for him. He was almost stone deaf and Auntie Ethel was the only person I knew that could talk to him. He must have had a specially modified driving licence to drive his sandy-coloured Chev utility. Anyway, it was the first time I had been to Melbourne. Strangely, it wasn't the multitude of tall buildings that took my breath away; it was the multitude of people. It was my first experience of people in queues, and extremely long ones, at that. The days play is lost in obscurity, but I, surely, would have remembered had Bradman been at the batting crease. So, logically, unless other Aussie batsmen occupied the crease all day, highly unlikely, Bradman must have been in the field.

My cricketing knowledge, possibly, could have influenced the editor of the Wangaratta Chronicle, Bob Loudon, to give me my first journalistic job, as I have mentioned before. As the reporter on the Castlemaine Mail before the war, he would have seen my name in the cricket statistics on the sporting page and had a general knowledge of all the other cricketing Pellas's. In the Wangaratta job, every Sunday, I was the sole occupant of the newspaper premises, ringing around to get cricket results. One weekend, I was given the two days off to attend the Test match in Melbourne.

On returning to Wangaratta on the Monday, I wrote a story, criticizing the Australian tactics as being the same as the England team had been lambasted for adopting on the previous day. This brought a response from the Benalla rival paper, calling me, in effect, un-Australian. Some Chronicle readers thought the same way, but I gained a heap of praise from my editor-in-chief, Milton Lewis.

chapter ten – boy scouts and the Depression years

Harcourt North Scout Troop was formed in the Depression years, approximately 1929 or 1930. The Depression (I give it a capital “D” to denote its important historical significance) lasted from 1929 to about 1938.

It started with the American Wall Street financial crash, and led to banks and so-called “blue chip” shares failing. The financial and industrial collapse soon spread world-wide. There was mass unemployment; queues hundreds of metres long formed for the chance of a handful jobs. The failing banks were rushed by customers fearing they were going to close, so depositors wanted desperately to withdraw their money. Those able to hold on to their jobs suffered vast reductions in wages.

Fruit, such as apples and pears became a luxury the average wage-earner could ill-afford. To counter this, Dad and Uncle Jack loaded our Chevrolet truck with cases of apples and ventured north. They travelled as far as Deniliquin and east along the Murray River to Tumbarumba, hawking those apples from door-to-door.

We country people were better off than the hundreds of thousands in the cities and, even, in the country towns. We could almost live off the land. We had apples, pears and plums even if they proved hard to sell. Eventually, case after case of apples was dumped into the furthest paddock corner from the house. They greatly improved the diet of horses and cows. We had milk from the cows (not that I ever drank a drop of it, having objected to the taste of it from the age of six or seven). Consequently, we had cream and butter, the former of which I lavishly spread on bread and jam. Mum made our own bread, baked our own scones, biscuits and cakes.

We had our own garden beds of vegetables: carrots, parsnips, lettuce, cabbages, cauliflowers, beetroot, peas and beans. For meat, Mum would often go down the paddock with a rifle and return with a rabbit or two. Rabbit fried in batter became a special treat. Later in the Depression, Ivan and I took over the rabbit-shooting duties, mostly on the mount. Later, too, per favour of Grandpa and his boat, we would return from the reservoir with a family feast of fish.

So, we were fairly self-sufficient so far as food was concerned.



There is a possibility, though not a probability, that the Scout troop was formed to counter the effect of the Depression. However, it possibly depended, in part, on the Depression, because a former Scoutmaster, Jim Ottrey, was employed locally.

I thoroughly enjoyed Scout activities. Knot-tying was a particular joy. For one thing, Dad had evolved a rapid method of tying a bowline with one end held captive. This prevented using both ends when tying a bowline around one's own body. In an inter-troop competition with Chewton (Jim Ottrey's original troop), Jack Jennings and I tied for fastest in a bowline time trial. The Chewton boys were much slower.

During the Depression years, the Boy Scouts World Jamboree was held at Frankston, bordering Port Phillip Bay. I was allowed to go, as one of the Castlemaine district contingents. Our campsite had a common boundary with Malaysian troop, who tried to teach us their language. We were on our best behaviour when the founder of Scouting, Lord Baden Powell, visited us. I was more excited when Mum, Dad and the rest of the family visited us. I was less than excited when it came my turn for cooking duties. I never mastered the art of cooking porridge, nor, for that matter, mastered the art of eating it, whoever cooked it.

As mentioned elsewhere, a camp of 100 or so "sustenance" workers was based on the other, Sutton Grange, side of Mount Alexander. One method adopted by the Australian government to counter mass unemployment was to build State and Federal projects of importance, State-wise and nationally. Such projects included improving roads and railways.

The Sutton Grange Project was designed to improve the water supply to the city of Bendigo. Dad gained the contract to transport cement from Harcourt railway station to the project. Therefore, Dad had frequent contact with the workers. During these conversations, he discovered one of the workers had boxed professionally. Dad persuaded him to give the Scouts boxing lessons. Boxing gloves were added to the Scout troop's equipment. These lessons proved very helpful when I have had to defend myself physically in the only two such fights I have had in my entire life.

Scouting stopped for me when I started attending senior technical school, due to the pressure of homework. The troop folded shortly after this time.

chapter eleven – more about the Great Depression

It occurs to me that I have too lightly passed over the effect of the Depression, which is commonly referred to as the Great Depression, so much was its historical significance to the whole world in much the same way as World War One was known as the Great War.

In its effect on mankind, in general, the Depression was equally catastrophic as the two world wars. Better, and more knowledgeable pens than mine have detailed the troubles of the Depression. However, perhaps I should write of the effects, as I recall them, on our rural life.

Many men – hundreds, or, more probably, thousands – took to the roads. Some of them looked for work, but most of them were contented – if that's the right word – to live on handouts. There was a government system whereby those men of the roads could obtain "sustenance" money. I don't know the details, and it is not the purpose of these memoirs to research such details. At any rate, the swagmen, as they were known colloquially, could call at offices in towns to obtain this money. Maybe they called at council offices or police stations. Probably they had to carry some identification that proved that the relative period had elapsed since they last obtained this sustenance money. I think they could obtain it once a week.

They were called "swagmen" because they carried all their possessions rolled up in blankets. (There have always been swagmen, not so many in the 21st century, but more so in the early 1900's. The Depression swelled their numbers to a huge extent). The bulky blanket roll, tied up with ropes (or leather straps if they were lucky), was called a swag. Or, as the renowned Australian poet Banjo Patterson called it in earlier times, "Matilda". In those earlier days, in most areas of Australia, the swag became Matilda, the constant companion of the swagman. Thus, as the great national song has it- "You'll come a waltzing, Matilda, with me". Hung on to the swag straps, or the swaggie's belt, would be a billy, containing a small supply of tea leaves, probably wrapped in a twist of newspaper, and, if he was lucky, some sugar. So he (they were all males) could boil up a "cuppa" without unrolling the swag.

Swagmen would often camp under bridges, being a convenient form of shelter for the night. We crossed a bridge over a small creek on our way to school. It appeared to be a rickety wooden affair, which I was sure would fall into the creek one day. As far as I know, it still exists today, 70 years later. Returning from school sometimes, we ventured down into the

creek. On the banks, under the bridge (it rarely carried much water), we would see evidence of some swagman's presence, in the form of campfire ashes.

I am indebted to my sister Bet for reminding me of Mum's contribution to the sustenance of swagmen. They called at our home, Wahroonga, regularly- there wouldn't be a week go by without a visit from one of their number, Mum's standard donation to their well-being was three sandwiches. One was meat, one was bread and jam; the third filling defeated Bet's memory – perhaps cheese or egg and lettuce. The swaggies were not asked by Mum to chop wood or similar chores demanded by other householders.

Rumour has it that swagmen would indicate to others which house was good for a feed, we speculated on what method was employed- was it a chalk mark on a fence post? Was it a stone or stick strategically placed where it would not be disturbed?

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Bet called to mind another feature of the Depression. Sustenance workers from Sutton Grange, the other side of the mountain, were invited to a social evening held in Harcourt North State School, No. 4043. These evenings took the form of "euchre and dance", as they were called. The dance portion, as the name implies, consisted of couples dancing. Not the type of dancing with couples gyrating opposite each other, but ball-room dancing as it is known today. For a change in the program, there was set dancing, or square dancing, as it is known today. Music was provided by Frank McNiece, an Irish rabbit-trapper, playing an accordion. Frank also called the "sets", the intricate arrangement of movements whereby the ebb and flow proceeded. One such set dance, I recall, was known as the Alberts. The barn dance, for individual couples, was very popular, perhaps gaining the name from dances held in country barns, rather than in country school houses.

The "euchre" part of the social evening comprised a progressive card game. Dad conducted the card proceedings. Because of his connection with the Sutton Grange Project and the Depression sustenance workers, some of them journeyed across Mount Alexander to participate in these social evenings. I don't know how they travelled to and from; maybe Dad drove them on our truck. Most of them preferred to play cards rather than the dancing.

The euchre games were held on trestle tables, covered with blankets, lined up end to end along one wall, and possibly around the corner, leaving the main space for the dancing. When the second classroom was added, with the ante-room between, I seem to remember the euchre party being held in the new room (The ante-room provided the only access to the school. Overcoats, galoshes and school-bags were deposited in this room). Around the card tables, the men sat on one side, women on the other. When each game finished, according to a time limit, it was signalled by the ringing of a bell, winning partners progressed to the next game, each partner moving to the right, thus each gaining a new partner (I cannot recall if the losing couple changed places, so they, too, each gained a new partner. I suppose they did, otherwise they could have been stuck with the same losing partner all night. By changing, each of the losing partners would be partnered by the incoming winners from the neighbouring games on each side).

I don't know if Dad was chosen as master of ceremonies for the cards because his limp prevented him from dancing, or if his no-nonsense command of proceedings made him a natural for the choice.

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At one of these socials, I was inveigled into my first attempt at smoking, at the age of 11. Ken McNiece, son of Frank and known as "Marts" for his preference of tomato lunches, was the culprit. Marts had found a special tree root which, because of its porous nature, was able to be puffed like a cigarette when lit. We sat on the darkened steps leading to the

ante-room, puffing away fir to kill, as cigarettes normally do, eventually. I have no doubt that would have been the result, had we persisted. Fortunately, they stank and tasted too awful for that to have happened.

Fortunately, too, 35 years after I had started smoking for real, I was able to stop “cold turkey”, with a little help from a church group, which I think was the Seventh Day Adventists. My wife, Bet, had seen an advertisement by the group stating a week long seminar was being held in a Penrith hall. On the first night of the seminar, I drove to Penrith, parked the car, and, as I locked it, I stamped on the cigarette I had been smoking. That was the last smoke I ever had, in 1975. The first night's illustrated lecture had been so graphic it showed what would cause my early death were I to continue smoking. I do have emphysema, recognized by the Department of Veterans' Affairs as being aggravated by war service, but, fortunately, I quit smoking before it became life-threatening, I hope.

chapter twelve – dad's bad leg...and temper

Previously I have mentioned Dad's injury – war wound – at Gallipoli, and the Army surgeons' decision to amputate his left leg, as a consequence. Dad's reaction to that was: "I am an orchardist; I can't go through life with only one leg; I can't work an orchard with only one leg." Eventually, a Dr. Tasman saved the leg. Hence, my Christian name.

However, the wounded, shortened leg led to hospitalization at various times. As Caulfield Military Hospital was some 130 kilometres away from Harcourt, there was little chance of family visits being made during these absences. However, on one occasion, not long before World War Two, I drove Mum, Ivan and sister Bet down to Caulfield for a visit. Dad had bought me a car a few months before, not long after I had started to work. It was a 10 horsepower Ford single seat coupe, with the boot behind the hood opening up as a "dicky" seat. When I recall how young and inexperienced a driver I was, with two younger ones in the open seat at the back, I am amazed at the temerity I showed in attempting the trip. We had a picnic on the hospital tennis courts and returned home, all in the one day.

The seasonal orchard chores of ploughing, pruning, spraying and picking inevitably took a great toll on Dad's physical condition. Ploughing was particularly demanding. I tried it during the year's break in my education and was found wanting. Pruning, too, was a bad time, because the weather was bitterly cold. The tasks Dad set himself, or were forced on him through such circumstances as the Depression, did not lead to an easy life. One with a less strong character could have succumbed to those circumstances.

However, occasionally, there came a breaking point. He was very short-tempered, as the ploughing horses could have born witness. Unfortunately, Mum bore the brunt of his temper. She also bore the marks of that temper as it reached a point of physical abuse. Such physical abuse seemed to come at the weekend. I imagine the build up of strain and pain reached breaking point after five or six hard days in the orchard. Or perhaps those days had been occupied in lumping cement.

Either way, Mum suffered badly, at times, during the weekend. She regularly walked down to Grandma Leversha's home on Sundays, taking us kids. I well remember helping her through the fence, bleeding and bruised about the face and body, as we started off through the paddock one Sunday.

It may have followed a Saturday night when the attack became very vicious. It kept us kids awake and, eventually, I got out of bed and threatened to kill Dad if he continued. How a 10 year old boy would carry out such a threat, I know not.

At this distance in time, I can understand the pressure and pain Dad suffered, but I cannot forgive the physical abuse. Looking back, too, I think Dad's hospitalization coincided with such physical outbreaks. In hospital, as therapy, Dad did some amazingly expert woodwork. Each of us children gained a combined crib-board-cum-card box and/or cigarette box, the latter of which served as a jewel case for the girls. The inlay work on each article was nothing short of a work of art. To cap it all off, Mum received an inlaid wooden tray which I would call exquisite.

All of which leads me to think that Dad understood the drastic effect of his temper, but he still could not control it.

chapter thirteen – “Wahroonga”

I have always understood the name of our home, “Wahroonga”, to be an Aborigine word meaning “home”, something I imagine the nomadic Aborigines never had permanently.

As a youngster, I only ever saw it written on envelopes, as part of the address, containing letters from Uncle Perce, who wrote regularly to Mum.

The most comforting feature of our home, to my mind, was the galvanized iron roof. Those people who have not heard the sound of rain on an iron roof in their childhood days have not lived life to the full. Sadly, in these days of concentration on terra-cotta tiling, that particularly sweet sound is in danger of disappearing. No matter how hard the downpour, the sound signalled, to me, the epitome of shelter.

The second most comforting feature of Wahroonga was the kitchen stove. It signalled warmth in winter, and winters in apple-growing districts are bitterly cold. The kitchen, virtually, became the living room. All of our activities revolved around the kitchen. Meals were eaten there. The huge table – approximately the size of a full-size billiard table – was used for card games, table-tennis, bobs (a game aimed at putting a billiard ball into various slots), school homework, or just sitting around, reading.

It was on this table that I first completed crosswords. Quite often, on our Friday shopping visits, we would return home with a copy of a magazine entitled “World News”. This magazine ran a crossword competition with various prizes for neat, correct entries. I sent away several entries and eventually won a prize.

As I write, my first memory of that prize was a Hawkeye box camera, but then I remembered I gained that prize by collecting 100 cigarette cards donated by my much older cousin Roy Pellas. They must have been won about the same time, because I date the association of words and pictures with the first glimmering thought of becoming a photo-journalist as occurring then.

I attribute my love of words to the encouragement I received from my mother to enter those crossword competitions, to doing my best at writing the various school essays, and the occasional letter written to my Uncle Perce. Mum was always in the kitchen, busy cooking, baking bread and cakes, washing the floor or dishes, until the night was well advanced.

Then, quite often, she would be at the table writing letters or reading. In later years, when we children had scattered far and wide, Mum must have spent most nights of the week writing letters. Her nightly labour of love probably started during the war, when I was being shifted to soldier sites all around Australia, Shirley was in Queensland guiding air force planes home by Morse code wireless telepathy, and Ivan was flying bombers over Germany.

In the last years of Mum's life, she virtually lived from one visit to the letter-box (of her precious little "Wee Hoose") to the next day's visit. If there were no letters on such a visit, Mum would be very disappointed, even a little cross-tempered, for the rest of the day. If I was down from Sydney, she would try to make a joke about not receiving letters: "No letters from Tas today", she would say.

Now that there are only the three of us, sister Bet has taken on the role of family communicator, much in the style of Mum. There is a difference, though, in the style of communication. Bet does write a lovely, human and humane letter, but she is too self-conscious of her lapses in spelling to put pen to paper very often. The telephone is Bet's preferred means of communication. Every Sunday, about 3.00pm, my phone will ring, with Bet on the other end, to tell me all about her family, and news of Ivan and Ethel.

Once upon a time – leave time from my army service – I took a night-time photo of Mum engrossed in her favourite pastime, probably writing to Ivan or Shirley. I still have that enlarged photo, showing Dad in the background. He is sitting in his favourite chair, in front of the fire, much as I had seen Grandpa Pellas at Hillside. Typically, they both sat reading the paper, or they just simply sat. During my army leave times, Dad and I sat on opposite sides of the stove, talking and keeping the fire going, until well after midnight. We had a full range of topics, but never touched on personal matters. Unfortunately, I could never get close enough to Dad to raise personal issues, more is the pity.



There was no electricity at Wahroonga until Ivan was old enough to install the wiring himself. I am not sure when that happened. Maybe it was when I first went into the army, for I was not living at home. I remember Ivan was very young and I think he had to call on a friendly licensed electrician to lend his name to the work to get it approved.

However, in the more recent years leading up to this stage, we did have an excellent lamp, called Aladdin (a trade name, but worthy of it), suspended over the kitchen table. Fuelled by petrol, I think, it produced more light than a 22nd century 100 watt globe. Like the popular illustrations of Aladdin's lamp, it had an ornate, large shade of white glass. There was only one other lamp in the house, a poor, weak thing, which was kept as a spare in case the Aladdin broke down. This meant we had to use candles in the bedroom. Many are the books I read by candlelight.

To light the stove fire in the morning, we kids had to forage for kindling. Every afternoon, soon after arriving home from school, Mum would say: "Come on, you children. Get your sticks and bushes." The kindling was always referred to as "sticks and bushes". The bushes comprised dead twigs, complete with dead leaves. Sticks were bigger twigs and small branches. We roamed the paddocks looking for sticks and bushes.

On bitterly cold nights, a fire was lit in the open fire-place of the so-called dining room ("So-called" because we rarely dined there). When the fire was going strongly, the logs, some 60cm long and 30cm in diameter, would burn for hours. On wet, cold weekends, this fire was started early in the day for the benefit of us children – and for the benefit of Mum, keeping us out of the way.

The space between the protruding fireplace and the outer wall of the dining room was neatly filled with the organ, a gift from Uncle Perce to Mum. I had imagined that it was a possible wedding present, but sister Bet, again, put me straight on that. She told me, a couple of days ago in her usual Sunday, 3pm telephone call, that she thought the organ

was a thank you present. The thanks were due to Mum for going to Koo-wee-rup, in Gippsland, cooking for her two brothers, Perce and Herb, when they were digging potatoes. I think Bet got one thing wrong, though, because I think the Koo-wee-rup episode centred on picking hops, rather than digging potatoes.

Before leaving the subject of fireplaces, I could never understand as a child – and never asked why – the house could be shifted from Maldon with the central brick chimneys and their foundations intact. I could understand how the outer kitchen chimney could have been left standing, but the problem of the two chimneys in the centre of two inner walls had me puzzled. It was only recently that I thought of a solution. I have seen photos in newspapers of houses being shifted, half at a time. I had always visualized them as being divided lengthwise. But what if they had been split crosswise? Wahroonga could have been divided so the two front rooms made up one half and the two central chimneys left standing. They could have been re-built in-situ before the two halves were re-joined at Harcourt.

The dining-room chimney served a double fireplace, the other being in my parents' bedroom at the front of the house. The other chimney served the girls' bedroom, also a front room, across the passageway from the main bedroom. You've guessed it- the boys had to make do with a cold bedroom.

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I have often thought of writing a short story based around Mum's playing of her organ and of Aunty Alice's playing of the harp. Apart from being Dad's sister, Aunty Alice was also the wife of Uncle Perce – kind of a double aunt, if you like. I gained the impression that Mum was jealous of Aunty Alice's prowess with the harp, which she apparently was invited to play on social occasions.

On one of Mum's last visits to Sydney, I took her to the Opera House to hear Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. In between movements, Mum whispered to me: "Where is the harp, Tas?" I thought that was a very telling question, particularly when there is no part for harp scored in that symphony (or there wasn't in that performance). With the proper expertise, which I possibly don't have, I thought those facts, with the addition of a bit of imagination, could be built into an interesting story.

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When I was studying at tech school, I constructed a wireless (radio) which I located in the corner of the dining-room directly opposite the organ. "Wireless" was a misnomer, for it had wires going every which way. The circuit was provided by the teacher of electricity and magnetism, Gus McLeod, of "fundamental principle" fame. The wireless was made long before the advent of transistors. In lieu thereof, it had three "valves" (I think it was three, but it could have been more). They were made of fragile glass on a Bakelite (plastic-like) base with three, four or five prongs. These prongs fitted into a socket, much the same as the plug of an electrical lead fits into a wall socket. They performed a vital part of producing the sound, but were prone to being "blown", like an incandescent light globe becomes blown after too long a use.

Tuning was by way of a variable condenser, which had series of aluminium semi-circular vanes rotating within a series of similar fixed vanes. The movable vanes were attached to a graduated dial that turned them to various points at which the radio stations were to be found. Some high quality wireless sets had two or three such condensers and dials (Uncle Jack's had three), which picked up the station at different points on each dial. This led to great confusion and difficulty in tuning.

My puny effort, in comparison, was built about the time Don Bradman was creating cricket records in England. Dad and I stayed up late, listening to Alan McGilvray faking the

broadcasts from cables received in Australia within seconds of the actual play he was describing. McGilvray would tap his desk with a pencil to simulate the sound of the bat hitting the ball and follow up with commentary on who was fielding the ball, the number of runs scored, whether the fieldsman caught the ball, and so on. That was how it was done before satellites or even before improvements in radio transmission allowed direct international broadcasts.

Later, we did have a rather ornate radio located in the same corner of the dining room. It was left on "appro" by a smooth talking salesman, a Mr. Cleverly, who, if memory serves me correctly, either owned or boarded at a shop in Harcourt. The term "appro" meant "approval": if the intended buyer approved, after a limited time, it became a sale. I think the sale was approved by Dad, but I don't remember how long Mr. Cleverly's radio lived in our dining room.

As an aerial to trap the sound waves, I rigged a wire cable, at least 25 metres long, between a chimney on our house and a tree in Douglas's paddock. Though they would probably have been ineffective, I inserted porcelain insulators at each end of the aerial as protection against lightning. Because we did not have electricity installed, we needed batteries to provide radio power. To provide an alternative to dry-cell batteries, I also rigged a cable from the apple shed, via the clothes line, to the dining room. With large alligator clips on each end, the cable provided power from the truck battery. With at least 50 metres to traverse, the resistance must have played havoc with the charge of the battery.



No description of Wahroonga would be complete without referring to a tree—a gum tree. A large tree, with a spread of some 40 metres, it was revered by all the family as the Umbrella Tree. As tall as it was wide, located about 150 metres due west of our home, it dominated what could be called the home paddock. It dominated, too, the view from the kitchen window. As we all virtually lived in the kitchen, we couldn't glance out of the window without catching sight of the Umbrella Tree. Therefore, it became synonymous with Wahroonga.

It was rounded, also, this gum tree, with the short trunk forming a handle to the umbrella. For some reason, cows and horses liked to nibble the leaves of this gum tree. In silhouette, therefore, the bottom of the tree was flat, parallel to the ground. It could be likened to a huge mushroom, with the trunk forming the stem. To us, however, it was always an umbrella.

Another tree had grown up alongside our tree, close enough for the nearer limbs to encroach upon it. When Dad had removed this second tree, long before we children knew of its existence, it left a scar – a hole, if you like – in the umbrella tree's outline. Seen from the house, the scar was unnoticeable; the umbrella outline was retained. So the scar was an imperfection that made the tree perfect, in our minds.

The beauty of the tree was seen at its best after a late afternoon shower of rain. The rays of the setting sun reflected the light from the quivering leaves and remaining twinkling droplets like so many glittering diamonds. That is the image remaining with me, reminding me of the happy times we, as a family, had at Wahroonga.

chapter fourteen – picnics and holidays

Previously, I have mentioned that social life at Harcourt North centred around the “euchre-and-dance” nights held in the school. However, for some of us, the highlight was the New Years Day picnic at the reservoir.

Various families would gather on the tree-lined grassy slopes. The mothers would have spent days cooking up treats. Mum’s cream puffs would always be a feature of this and every other social gathering.

The Jones, Jennings and Pellas families always spread their rugs and blankets near each other. There would be other families: perhaps the three Bertuch (pronounced “bert-toe”) families of brothers Frank, Dick and Paul among others. They would be part of the picnic atmosphere, but not central to it, as far as we were concerned.

We kids would board the flat-bottomed boats at drawn up at the “beach” at the foot of the grassy slope. Sometimes we would pretend to fight off pirates trying to board us from the neighbouring flat-bottomed boats. At other times, we would pretend to be fishing on the calm waters of the reservoir.

Not much fishing would actually be done by the picnic families. That was left to the older boys: the Leversha brothers Frank, Alan and Ray, or Maurice Pellas. The pretence of us being on the open water changed when Grandpa put his boat on the Res. His boat was moored at the far end of the half-kilometre long bank, which ran at right-angles from the right hand side of the grassy slope picnic area. I can well remember one picnic day being out on the water in the boat when Grandpa hoisted the sail. I thought, at the time, how envious those other boys on shore would be. Here was I, sailing along, albeit in a small five-metre dinghy, and they were stranded ashore.

Writing of those New Years Day picnics makes me think of our school picnics. Or was it the Sunday school picnics? There was hardly any difference between the pupil personnel of school and Sunday school. Apart from the McMahons and the McNeices, that is. I think it was the school picnics.

In any case, these picnics were held in Castlemaine Botanical Gardens. To get there, we and other pupils lined up, back-to-back on school forms the length of Dad’s truck. The

wooden forms must have been fastened to the tray, but I have no recollection of them being so. No driver, these days, would dare to transport children this way. Today, even dogs are not allowed to travel on an open tray.

This picnic was set out in an open-sided shelter in the gardens, Mum's cream puffs taking pride of place once again. While it was being prepared, the interest of we pupils was centred on the swings, see-saws and so on. I was never much good on the swings. Others would get them up to giddy heights- not for me. I would rather wander over to the lake and watch the ducks, particularly if Gwen Jones was doing likewise.



The first time I saw the sea, I must have been nine or ten years old. It was at Balnarring on Western Port Bay, in Victoria. Harry Ford had told Dad it was an ideal camp site, where he took his family for a Christmas holiday each year (Harry Ford seems to feature more in these memoirs than he did in reality. We had very little daily contact with any of the three wealthy Ford families).

Dad had taken us all down on his truck. Surrounded by tents and camping gear, us three oldest children and Mavis Tingay sat on the back of the truck, singing songs throughout most of the trip. Betty Kinkles, as she was known then, was only a toddler, so I think she was in the front with Mum. Mavis Ford, came along for the holiday, mainly, I suspect as a minder for Betty, although she was only a few years older than me.

We lived in tents (I think there were two), with the soft sand comprising the floor. Dad had taught us to make a hip hole, just like the ones he made sleeping rough in the army during the war (a romantic conception for us kids). There was almost a forest of tea-tree around us. About 150 metres away, there was a general store – a convenience store in today's terms.

We spent most of the days in the sea. At low tide, we could walk almost a kilometre out from the beach. We imagined – at least I did – that we could walk out to Phillip Island.

It was a great holiday.

It was many a year before I saw the sea again. I suppose it would have been 10 years or more – not until I was working in Melbourne at the Meter and Tests Department of the State Electricity Commission. However, that holiday sustained me for all those years.

It had to do so, for we, as children, never had another one.

chapter fifteen – mount Alexander: rabbits, worms and granite

M

ount Alexander!!! Now, there is a name to conjure joyful thoughts of a happy childhood.

Mount Alexander- The name means days of shooting rabbits, getting rabbits out of burrows by means of ferrets, a make-pretend fortress of Castle Rock, the flagstaff, the granite quarry, stone fences and worms for fishing.

Mount Alexander was the original name given to the gold diggings of Forest Creek and surrounding areas. Much later, when a township was formed around the diggings, the name was changed to Castlemaine. But the mountain remained "Mount Alexander", just as it was when the explorer Major Mitchell discovered and named it. He built the flagstaff on the highest point. It was a circular cairn some eight to ten feet in diameter, some 12 to 15 feet in height. Built of the natural granite rocks of the area, it originally held a pole protruding from the top, hence "the flagstaff".

I was first introduced to rabbit shooting by my cousin Geoff, who was three or four years older than me. We used .22 gauge single shot rifles. Dad had taught me the safety precautions of shooting, on the rare occasions he had taken his double barrel shot gun out with me when I was much younger. Soon, I was allowed to take Ivan out on the mountain with me. He proved to have a quicker eye for spotting rabbits and a truer eye for shooting them on the run.

Later, however, Ivan mostly roamed the mountain with his mate, Trev Quirk, as his sole companion (The Quirk property was separated from Wahroonga by a large paddock, some 300 or more hectares, known as Douglas', adjoining our boundary, and a road, Ely's Lane. Trev's sister, Ethel, eventually became Ivan's wife). Those two boys had a hide-out-cum-fortress on the mount, known as Castle Rock. Access to the top of the rock, approximately 30 to 40 feet, was by way of a split in the rock (known, as I understand it, as a "chimney"). Many are the times Ivan and Trev defended Castle Rock from "marauding Indians".

When we started fishing, after Grandpa put his boat on the reservoir, we started foraging on the mount for bush worms. These worms were highly prized as bait. Dad taught Ivan and I how to find them under fallen, rotten logs and at the base of trees. If I remember rightly, we used to sell the worms to our older cousins. Maurice (Maury) was an excellent angler,

eventually graduating to fly- fishing. I think Maury was one of the instigators of introducing trout into the reservoir. In any case, I know Ivan sold worms to a Castlemaine fishing tackle shop after I had left home to work in Kyneton and Maryborough for the State Electricity Commission. He complained bitterly about the poor prices the shop owner paid him. Little did I think I would become a worm farmer (vermicologist?) after I retired from journalism.



For a brief period, we had ferrets at Wahroonga. They are smelly creatures, but good at scaring rabbits out of burrows. Maybe it was the strong smell that drove the rabbits out!!! We placed a special net over each hole of a burrow. When a rabbit came bolting out, he became entangled in the net.

Sometimes, the ferret would not follow the rabbit and would fail to emerge, no matter how long we waited for it. In those cases, we would resort to digging him out, or if the burrow were too big and complicated, to lighting fires in the mouth of several holes, hoping the smoke would drive him out. Sometimes, all our efforts were unsuccessful. In those cases, we would have to leave the ferret in the burrow, with the nets still in place, and go home. We would return to the burrow the next day, or as soon as possible, armed with Dad's small hand bellows.

Filled with smouldering dry animal manure (cow, horse, sheep, etc.), bee-keepers use the smoke from these bellows to disperse bees while their hives are robbed of honey. Not that Dad kept any custom-built hives for any length of time- he robbed the bees of their honey in their natural habitat – hives in trees. Ferrets disliked smoke as much as bees, so we soon retrieved the ferret from the burrow he had made his temporary home, even if only for a few hours.



Granite was quarried out of the side of Mount Alexander. In my day, the one and only quarry was known as Blight's. The great achievement of Blight's was the supply of granite used as the main construction material at Cockatoo Dock in Sydney Harbor. Second in renown for Blight's was the polished granite facing applied to one of Melbourne's leading multi-storey bank buildings.

One summer's day, Jack Jennings, Ivan and I went exploring at the quarry. Firstly, we slaked our thirst at the quarry well. This well was renowned for its sweet water, icy-cold even on the hottest day. It was surrounded, including overhead, by discarded blocks of granite, with a door-sized opening in front to enable the thirsty to dip for water with the aid of a tin billy-can on the end of a rope.

It was a weekend, so no workmen were on site. Following our drink, we wandered around, finishing high above the cliff face from which the granite was extracted. Here, we found an old winch. As boys the world over will do, we started playing with it, turning the wheels and pinions. All of a sudden, there was a loud scream. Ivan had got a finger jammed between the teeth of two pinions. Jack and I quickly reversed the cogs, but the tip of Ivan's finger was a bloody mess.

Our versions (Ivan's and mine) differ as to what happened next. I must admit that I am very hazy about proceedings. As the eldest of the three, I considered myself responsible for coping with the situation. Possibly, I have blanked the immediate aftermath from my memory.

Ivan maintains we went down to the cottage of Tim Ely, a quarry workman who also acted as a virtual quarry gate keeper during non-working days (There was no actual gate, but the only driveway entrance passed between a wall of granite off-cuts on one side and the cottage on the other). This immediate descent to the cottage would have been the clever

thing to do. However, I think we left post-haste to the Jennings' home, where we were staying for the day. This would have taken 20 minutes, compared to five minutes to Ely's, but 30 minutes to Wahroonga. Anyway, Ivan was taken to hospital, where the mangled finger tip received several much needed stitches.

Mount Alexander, too, was the scene of motor-bike hill climbs. One of our cousins, Roy, had a high-powered motor-bike and we occasionally attended the climbs. The location was adjacent to the north gap on the Sutton Grange road, the one used by Dad for his cement carting contract. Heading from the road, there was flat land for about 100 metres before a very steep rise. The bike riders used the flat ground to gain enough speed, hopefully, to reach the top of the high ground. Not many ever did.



With such a vast amount of granite available, it is strange there are so few buildings constructed of granite in Harcourt and environs. Apart from the first grade granite shipped Australia-wide, there are tons and tons of reject material suitable for house-building. From a fading memory bank, I am only certain of four granite block homes existing in the area, although I am vaguely conscious that there may have been four or five more. Anyway, such houses are the rare exception, rather than the rule.

Two of the existing granite homes with which I am familiar belonged to my former wife, Melva (nee Wilson) and my recently deceased friend (and Ivan's mate) Trev Quirk. Melva's home is undoubtedly more than 100 years old, whereas Trev's was built during his lifetime, if it, indeed, was ever finished. The Wilson home, "Melvyn", so named after Melva and her only sibling, Vincent, has now been sold. Melva, sadly, had become so permanently ill as to require the constant attention of our daughters, Barbara and Judith. The price received at auction on October 9, 2004, Federal Parliament election polling day, was \$187,000. A comparative value for a solid house of similar vintage in a New South Wales rural area would probably be at least \$250,000, in my estimation. That would be for a house on a normal quarter-acre block, not for an equivalent building on a large property.

I guess the weight of granite blocks daunted the great majority of builders from using them for house construction. Special cranes would be needed to lift the blocks into position. In Trev's case, he was, by nature, an ingenious operator. I vaguely remember him showing me an A frame, with pulleys, ropes and a small engine attached. His house design started with an excavated hole, which formed the cellar. Located directly west of "Hillside", on the opposite side of Reservoir Road, my last visit there remains fresh in my memory. All the walls were built, the roof was on, but we had afternoon tea in the lounge room with that gaping hole endangering our every movement. About that time, or probably a bit later, Trev wrote an article on his endeavours. It was published in a small environmental magazine under the title: "The house that Trev built."

At the quarry, itself, lifting the granite blocks was very little problem. Two or three huge cranes were strategically placed within the perimeter. This enabled the transfer of the original rough block, as blown from the cliff face by explosives, to an area where it could be split into smaller blocks, if required, and trimmed to the desired sizes. As school children, we always knew when the original blocks were blown from the quarry façade. The sound of the explosion clearly carried to the schoolroom, causing simultaneous turnings of heads towards the wall of windows, through which the smoke and dust could still be seen rising from the site, although it would be four or five kilometres away.

When the blocks were finally shaped to their correct sizes, they would be lifted by another crane and loaded on a long six-wheeled wagon for transportation to the railway station. The wagon was pulled by a team of at least four, probably six, Clydesdale draught horses. The horses knew the route so well, even negotiating crossroad corners, the driver, George Wilkinson, slept most of the 10 or more kilometres.

chapter sixteen – starting work

M

y working life, from, say, 1936 to 1954, I regard as a horrible mistake, a life gone wrong.

Any thoughts I had of a career had hinged round being a photographer, and thereby hangs a tale I have referred to on various previous pages. Please bear with me if I enlarge upon it now. “Enlarge” is the operative word, so to speak.

By dint of saving 100 cigarette cards cadged from my older smoking cousins, I had won a “Hawkeye” box camera, a primitive affair, but it did take clear photos. It was a highly prized possession. With it, I had taken a set of four photos making a panorama of the Harcourt valley. Taken from the top of our favourite Castle Rock, I thought this was a fine achievement. I envisaged the panorama as a worthy start of a photographic career, perhaps, somehow, combined with my love of words.

I reckoned without Dad's reaction to the travelling photographer episode and the ensuing “enlargements”, which had happened about two years earlier it may have been possible. Recapitulating that episode - Mum had commissioned a depression-affected out-of-work photographer to have two postcard black-and-white photos enlarged, coloured and framed. They were of Dad and one of his brothers in full army uniform. I still have one of those small B&W photos, with the travelling photographer's colour notations on the back of it.

Mum had thought it would be a pleasant surprise for Dad, and in today's family values the two enlargements were well worth any money Mum had committed to pay. Wendy had never known her two grand-fathers – they had died before she was born – and with her love of tradition and the past, she values highly that large depiction of her father's father.

Surprise they were for Dad, but pleasant? Not at all. He lost his temper over the affair; I lost any chance for a photographic career. Dad set about making me become an electrician. That's what two years of an electrical engineering course were designed to make me. Strangely enough, when I radically changed direction, and really started life, as a journalist, Dad was proud that I had shown such initiative and decisiveness.

But that was to happen 18 years in the future. Now, in 1936, Dad had had enough of education and when a job opportunity came along, it was not of an electrical nature.

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I had always been good at engineering drawing and lettering, in particular. The job vacancy was in the Castlemaine branch of the State Rivers and Water Supply. An engineer had been employed to chart the town water reticulation. He required someone to transfer his survey measurements to tracing cloth from which drawings could be printed to provide a permanent record of the town's water system. I became that someone.

The engineer spent most of his time in the field. Therefore, I was the sole occupant of the engineering office on the top floor. My memory again fails to remember if that was the second or third floor.

State Rivers and Water Supply occupied two rooms in Castlemaine Post Office, the most majestic building in the heart of the town then, long before the town became a city (I suppose the market building could be judged an equal, but it was not of the heart of town, and as for the Town Hall and Theatre Royal, they would have taken second place). The main S.R. & W.S. office was on the ground floor, giving the public direct access off the street.

The post office had a sturdy clock tower surmounting the building. The engineering office was directly beneath the tower, so I gained the full benefit of the bells that chimed the hour and every quarter-hour. The telephonists manning the manual exchange were on the same floor. I often wondered how they were able to concentrate on the job of listening to the requests for telephone numbers. It was bad enough in my job. Incidentally, one of the telephonists, Lily McMahon, was a near neighbour of ours and a former classmate at Harcourt North State School. However, I was discouraged from fraternizing with the telephonists. In any case, they must have had a separate entrance, because I never met any of them on the stairway. Besides, I had my own girl friend, Dorothy Birch.

My heart, however, was not in the job of junior draftsman. I was not really a dab hand at drawing on tracing cloth. Perhaps if I had to commit the plans to drawing paper, and had an assistant to do the tracing work, I would have been a lot happier. Later in life, three or four years after the war, when I was a filing clerk in a drawing office that was the way it was done. The draftsmen drew the routes of electrical power lines, mostly, and young girls, called tracers, copied the plans onto tracing cloth, ready for them to be printed.

Apparently, in the first instance, I was recommended for my first job by the principal of the senior technical school, Mr. King. The S.R. & W.S. manager, Mr. Griffiths, was by way of a family friend; his sister was the mother of class-mate, Dudley Douglas, at Harcourt North State School. So, wheels-within-wheels, I was a sitter for the job.

I lasted about 12 months. Then a job in the electrical field became vacant with the State Electricity Commission.

chapter seventeen – meter testing in the Big

Smoke

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he electrical job with the State Electricity Commission of Victoria was that of meter tester.

At this distance in time, some 60 years, I find it difficult to place myself in any given location at any time. There were stints at Meter and Tests headquarters in the Melbourne suburbs of Richmond, Kyneton, Trentham, Maryborough, while being based ostensibly at Castlemaine. Then there were periods, mainly post-war probably, where I was more or less permanently based for long periods at Castlemaine and, again, at Richmond.

I will endeavour to sort them out for my own satisfaction; I hardly think it will be of any importance for anybody else. In any case, as far as I am concerned, my working life only began in 1954.

After a brief period of cleaning and painting exteriors of meters in stock at Castlemaine, I was transferred to the department head-quarters at Richmond to be fully trained as a meter tester. This was a dramatic change of environment for a country lad at the tender age of 18; at least I felt it was. The only time I had been in the Victorian capital city before was a vaguely remembered visit, with Mum, to Uncle Herb and Uncle Perce and their families. Then there were the times Dad had driven us through the city to Balnarring and the Scout jamboree at Frankston.

I was started on testing the normal single phase meters, as installed then in the majority of households. It was my first experience of industrial laboratory work. I soon picked up enough experience to invent ways and means of making the work easier. We each had a bench capable of lining up 10 single phase meters for simultaneous testing. The more advanced senior testers had single benches where the more complicated two-phase and three-phase meters were tested.

Every now and then, a tester would connect a meter wrongly or apply too much amperage, resulting in a loud “pop” as the meter-board bench fuse would be blown. There would be a chorus of loud calls, naming the offender. One senior tester, Frank Ryan was the most constant offender. “Frank Ryan” would resound from the laboratory rafters. It was Frank that dubbed me “Taciturn Tas”.

There were not that many nicknames, as I recall. However, I had coined two of my own. They probably say something about my rebellious nature where over-bearing authority is concerned. The superintendent controlling Meter and Tests was a nasty piece of work. His name was Martin ... Harry S. Martin. He always initialled directives that appeared on the notice board "H.S.M." I labelled him "His Satanic Majesty".

Then there was the assistant laboratory overseer, whose name I forget – he was a most forgettable man. His immediate superior, the overseer, was one of nature's gentlemen, a Scotsman, universally respected, answering only to "Mac" or "Mr. Mac". While on duty, Mac sat in a central office, enclosed by glass from about hip-high. Being a tall man, he was thus able to freely view the whole lab.

When Mac was on holidays or on duty elsewhere, his assistant occupied the glass cage. Compared to Mac, he was a short stubby character, without any worthwhile character. He wore powerful glasses, looped over protruding ears. Stationed in his office, he was just able to peer over the bottom edge of the glass, and peer he did, unceasingly. He reminded me of the slogan used by Cinesound news films then shown in theatres "The Eyes and Ears of the World". That was my nickname for him; or "Cinesound" for short; or Cin (Sin?) for shorter.



During the time I was at Meter and Tests, Bob Menzies was in his heyday as Prime Minister. He did more than anyone to aggravate the workers and to consolidate the unions against him. As a worker in the electrical industry, I was a member of the Electrical Trades Union.

Up to this stage in my life, and even during my first job, I tended to favour the conservative side of politics, if and when my thoughts turned to politics. That was soon knocked out of me when I saw how the other half lived and how they were treated by their so-called masters. I only had to walk down from Richmond railway station to revise my thinking. The railway line was on one side of the street. On the other side – "the wrong side of the tracks" – was a line of virtual hovels.

I attended an election meeting in Melbourne Town Hall, at which Bob Menzies was the principal speaker, and the arrogant manner in which he brushed aside intelligent questions from interjectors did not impress me. From his point of view, he was not on the platform to answer questions, but to put his Liberal government policy forward.

However, he didn't have to make fools of his audience, which is what he did, at every opportunity, to those who had a relevant question opposing his policy.

The political outlook lacking consideration for the man in the street coloured my view of life. It wasn't helped by His Satanic Majesty proclaiming he could make an electrical meter tester of any man-in-the-street, regardless of his technical education.

I remember getting into an argument with an avowed communist, a senior colleague, about the need for tolerance in the world. Gus was his name, and he maintained there should be no toleration – or, rather, there was too much toleration abroad in the world. I argued there was not enough tolerance.

Years later, after the second world war, when Bob Menzies had made a political comeback from years in the political wilderness, I was a white-collar union secretary. "Pig Iron Bob", as he was known, owed his new political strength to branding most union representatives "communists". He saw 'reds under the beds' everywhere. As a result, despite my pleas for tolerance, I was branded a communist, even in my home district of Harcourt. But that was well into the future, and I will deal more fully with that story in chapters to come.



Life in the big smoke, however, was not confined to political influence and/or work; far from it.

Before I arrived, arrangements had been made for me to board in an average type house in Camberwell East. Presumably, the arrangements had been made by Meter and Tests. I learned later that another tester named Green had boarded there previously, with the owner and sole occupier, Mrs Bowra. I guess the assistant superintendent, M. & T, Mr. Stan Gower, had organised the accommodation. Mr. Gower was a kind, efficient administrator. How he could suffer being H.S.M's assistant defies understanding. It was little short of surprising when, after the war, I learned that Stan Gower had committed suicide.

The suburban house of Mrs. Bowra's backed on to a busy commuter's railway line. For one brought up in the country, miles away from any railway line, 100 metres from even a quiet rural road, sleep was impossible before midnight for the first few weeks. The trains stopped running about that time. After three or four weeks though, I never noticed whether the trains were running or not!

The wonders of city life soon captured my imagination- the night-sky ceiling of the State theatre, the Wurlitzer organs in theatres. I attended first nights at the Tivoli Theatre (known as the Tiv.) and His Majesty's (J.C. Williamson).

I visited my Aunty Rene in her St Kilda Road apartment. When she heard that I had first-nighted at the Tiv, she expressed amazement. Then she told me that her husband, Charles Brandreth, was the Tivoli secretary, and she prevailed upon him to give me free tickets.

I ventured out to Deer Park, where another of Dad's sisters, Aunty Ety (another Ethel) lived. It was an adventure, for the house was one of three in a suburban sub-division, the sole occupants of a very large paddock, even by country standards. There were no other houses within a kilometre. This visit led to an ice-skating date with cousin Gwenda (Gwendaline) at Wirth's Circus, the then ice-skating venue in Melbourne. I spent most of the date on my backside at ice surface level. It was my first and last ice-skating venture.

There is a photo in my album taken at a ball in St Kilda Town Hall. This was a big occasion for me. It was my first black tie event. For me, dancing had been confined to a few lessons and the odd social. I don't know how I came by the dress suit. Probably, it was organized by my Uncle Herb, because his daughter, Phyllis, accompanied me to the ball. She is one of the four in the aforementioned photo. The others are our respective partners, whose names I have long forgotten.

Flush with earning good money, I bethought myself able to visit a bespoke tailor and order my first tailor-made suit, complete with waistcoat. It created quite an impression among the girls when I wore it on holidays in Castlemaine. It attracted attention, too, from girls of a different sort on one occasion.

I liked to stroll around the city on my own, at night, taking in the various street sights, which fascinated me. Sauntering up Collins Street one night, around about William Street, a car stopped alongside me, and out got two ladies of the night. I had no idea who they were when they asked me for the time. They soon enlightened me. They persisted, at length, in this virtually deserted area this late at night, offering all sorts of fantasies. However, I had visions of V.D. (venereal disease) and I did not succumb to their temptations.

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Apart from the nights at the ball, ice-skating, and the non-dalliance with the ladies of the night, my only contact with the female sex was with Dorothy Birch's sister, Elsie, who was

working in Melbourne, and a near neighbour of Mrs. Bowra, another Dorothy, with the surname of Brotherton.

With Elsie, I visited a Salvation Army chapel one night. I distinctly remember that one and only night out with her. We became trapped. The Salvo captain conducting the meeting asked "All those who believe in God, stand up." There was a unanimous response. Then he gave the command "All those members of the Salvation Army resume their seats." Alone, we two remained standing. There then followed five, maybe 10 or more, minutes harangue; I cannot put it lighter. It felt like an hour before the Mexican stand-off weakened, with no side winning.

Years later, when I was at war, the Salvo's earned my greatest respect with their service to the armed forces. However that night of public "showing-up" remains with me. Perhaps we deserved it.

Afterwards, we were sitting on a park bench when Elsie mentioned her boy-friend up in Castlemaine, Syd Smith. She hinted that she and Syd sat on such seats differently. She would straddle her boy-friend, facing the opposite way, with her legs in the space between the back rail and the flat of the seat. If it was an invitation, I was too slow to take advantage. (Or too loyal to her sister? In any case, I had not indulged in any such sexual contact with anybody, even Dorothy. If that makes me a "goody two-shoes", so be it.)

The only other date was with a girl who lived two or three houses up the street from Mrs Bowra's home. Her name was Dorothy Brotherton. We went to the movies several times. We did dally in the park on the way home, innocently close but side by side, on the seats. (Remaining loyal, still, to my Dorothy).

chapter eighteen – meter testing in the bush

Now comes a difficult test of memory, so far as timing is concerned. Was it the year 1937? Was I based in Maryborough first or at Kyneton? How did I fit the the periods at Maryborough, Kyneton and, later, Castlemaine into the time before World War II claimed me?

It must have been Maryborough first. I rode my pushbike over to Maryborough on Monday mornings, and home again to Wahroonga after work on Fridays. I didn't have a driving licence at this stage, whereas I did at Kyneton.

And the year? Well, let's try to work it out. I gained my Merit Certificate (as it was in those days in primary school) at the age of 12. My birthday is in October (October 11, 1919), so I started Tech in 1931, at the age of 12. I gained my Junior Technical Certificate in the first year and Senior Technical Certificate in second year, aged 14, in 1933. I had a year in the orchard, so I started senior tech aged 15, in February, 1935. I had two years at senior tech, so I left in November, 1936. I had about 12 months as junior draftsman, so I started as a meter tester in 1938. Anyway, these dates and periods of being here and there are only approximate, dimmed by the lapse of 60 years or so.

One date I can firmly fix as being in Maryborough is Friday the 13th of January, 1939—Black Friday. That is the day that raging bushfires swept through Victoria. The nearby town of Talbot was threatened and two of our meter testers, Ken Eden and Harry Stansfield, were involved in fighting the fires there.

During my stay in Maryborough, I was accommodated in the best hotel, all expenses paid. The SEC branch secretary, Vera, was also housed there. She was indulging in a blatant affair with colleague Harry Stansfield. I gathered that I too, could have been involved, but Vera said my finger nails were too long. Maryborough days were well behind me before slow-witted, innocent Tas realized that a hinted invitation had been offered.



At first, I road my push-bike to and fro between Wahroonga and Maryborough, separated as they were by some 40 kilometres. I remember, on one occasion, riding that distance to Castlemaine to attend a dance and then returning to Maryborough in the early hours of the morning. Later, Ken Eden would drive me in his BSA sports car, dropping me off on a Friday

night in Castlemaine on his way home to Melbourne. Dad would pick me up and drive me back to Castlemaine in time for Ken to pick me up on the Monday morning.

The other member of the Maryborough contingent was Bill Taylor, as close a friend as ever I had. We went to church meetings together, Bill being religious- in a high church, Anglican sort of way – more religious than I was, by far.

He came out to Wahroonga for a weekend. I spent a weekend at his parents' home at the Melbourne southern suburb – goodness knows how and when I got there. Bill had a car before I did, so maybe he drove me there.

Later, when I did own a car, probably at the end of our Maryborough stint, we spent a week on a dairy farm owned by Bill's relations in the Gippsland district, near the town of Leongatha. I well remember Bill and myself chasing each other around the streets of that town, in our respective cars, late at night, an act which I would roundly condemn if any of my own family would copy in this day and age. Not that it was any less dangerous in my own day and age.

I took a photograph of a shaded small river scene, during that holiday, which I deemed worthy of submitting in a competition. It didn't gain a prize – not even a mention – but I still have that enlargement of the original photo. When it came time to depart the farm, a young lass, one of Bill's cousins, tearfully begged me to take her with me. Without any justification, I hasten to add. Apparently, unknown to me, and without any attempt by my part, I had won her heart.



The main reason, I gather, for our meter testing team's invasion of Maryborough, was based on the recent take-over of the town's privately-owned electricity supply by the State Electricity Commission of Victoria. The S.E.C., apparently, had little faith in the private company's accuracy of metering. If I remember rightly, we had two test boards, capable of testing a total of 20 meters at the one time. This would give us a daily average of at least 40. All the meters, too, were given a facelift – a re-paint.

The big moment of 1939 came when I took possession of my own car, a 1937 Ford 10hp coupe. The manner of acquiring it was thrilling in itself. When I arrived home (possibly by pushbike from Maryborough, on this occasion) Dad was out working in the orchard. Mum said "There is a surprise for you down in the shed". I had no inkling of it – it was a surprise, well and truly.

Dad had a hell of a job teaching me to drive. Eventually, however, I turned up at Castlemaine Police Station, and Sergeant Geoff Hookey passed me for my licence. (Ironically, as I write this, I am waiting for a test to retain – regain, actually – my licence, which was suspended three months ago, through no fault of mine. Because I was convalescing from a total knee replacement at the time, I was unable to take the compulsory test when I turned 85 on October 11, 2004. On and after turning 85, a driving licence test must be taken on one's birthday each year).

While Bill Taylor was staying at Wahroonga one weekend, I half-jokingly made a prophecy that changed my life forever when it eventually came true. It was a near-meeting with my future wife- it was hardly a near-miss, so I will call it a near-meeting. This must have been before we acquired our respective cars. Dad had taken us down to Harcourt, where he had business with the manager of Harcourt Fruit Supply, one Claude Wilson. The Fruit Supply was an organization that marketed some of Dad's fruit – not all of it, because Dad did some of his own marketing. The Fruit Supply was housed in a huge building, much like a warehouse. It contained apple grading machines at which packers were employed, wrapping apples in tissue paper and packing them in wooden boxes for export.

By contrast, the office was one of the smallest I have ever seen -- beaten only, in minimum size, by the one-man editorial office at the Nepean Times, of which I was the sole occupant, some 25 years in the future. The size of the office, was perhaps, why Claude's daughter, Melva, was waiting outside. Bill and I, also, were waiting outside, in the cabin of Dad's truck. Melva was in her father's car, apparently waiting to drive him home to lunch. Although Melva and I were almost complete strangers, I felt moved to turn to Bill, and say "That's the girl I'm going to marry".

At this stage, we hadn't spoken to each other. We used to travel in the same train to school, her to high school, me to tech, but we boys kept well away from the girls on the train. I sometimes passed her going to or coming from the train. Melva would be with one of her school friends. It was a standing joke between them that, although they spoke to me, I never spoke to them. I was too shy.

It wasn't long after my prophecy to Bill that I attended a Sunday School social at Harcourt Methodist Church (long before "Methodist" became "Uniting"). Melva was there and that was the night when the courtship really began.

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When the job in Maryborough was completed, the group of us four meter testers was disbanded. My next move was to Kyneton, where I was based with the senior branch meter tester, Cedric Stephenson, who had not been involved in the Maryborough project. Like Maryborough, Kyneton was within the boundaries of Midland branch of the S.E.C. of Victoria, the branch head-quarters being at Castlemaine. Kyneton was virtually half-way between Castlemaine and Melbourne. For transport, Cedric and I used an SEC vehicle, a 7hp Austin coupe. Coupes were "in" in those days -- the equivalent nowadays would be the small two-door cars with the cramped back seat area. I don't remember having my car at Kyneton, although I know I had my licence, because I occasionally drove the Austin and other vehicles. Maybe, despite what I may have written earlier, it was during my time there that Dad gave me the baby Ford.

This time, my accommodation was provided in a boarding house, all expenses paid by the SEC. The other boarders were two nurses and the occasional travelling salesman. Together with the nurses, the son of the boarding house keeper and I made up a foursome. We had some sort of a wager whereby the first to get married paid some sort of a forfeit. I forget the details. I, however, dallied outside the foursome with a salesgirl from one of the town's largest emporiums. (I think that is what they were called in those days -- a store where both men's and women's clothes were sold). This lass, who I nicknamed Violet, was all for playing mothers-and-fathers for real. For some reason, I stopped short of "going all the way". However, I did take the next crucial step with a waitress who worked at the boarding house. For weeks afterwards, I suffered agonizing doubts of having contracted V.D. (venereal disease). I actually went to a doctor in Castlemaine to check on this possibility. He gave me a clear bill of health.

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The meter-testing in Kyneton was in-situ. In other words, we went from house to house, testing the meters as they were, in place and live (to coin a phrase). I don't remember the exact details, but we each had a portable test kit, which we individually carried by hand from house to house. Power for the test kit was supplied from the meter being tested. A variable resistance (potentiometer) supplied the various loads (wattages). The speed of the meter rotating under the various loads (ranging from the equivalent of a light bulb to that of, say, an electric iron), were checked against the speeds of the test kit.

Cedric would do one side of the street and I the other. That way, he was readily available if I should get into trouble. To the contrary, it was Cedric who occasionally ran into trouble...dogs! He was mortally afraid of dogs, and, as is the way with dogs, they were aware of it. Whenever his way was barred by a dog, Cedric would call on me. I loved dogs,

and, as is the way with dogs, they knew it. Hence, I had no problem with calming Cedric's would-be aggressor.

The Midland branch area also included the town of Trentham, virtually little more than a village a short distance from Kyneton. Having recently gained my licence, I seized every opportunity to drive the little Austin. One day, as we were proceeding to the next street, with me at the wheel, a young lady proclaimed her availability by standing nude in the front doorway. As I was concentrating on my driving, I was unaware of the invitation. Nor was I aware of the circumstances for some time. As luck would have it, the first house of the new street had a dog guarding it. "You do this one," Cedric said, "and, as it's near lunch time, take an hour off when you have finished it. I have some business to attend to." So he shot off as quickly as he could. While I was enjoying my lunch, he was enjoying feminine company.

I could not understand Cedric's appeal to women. He was far from handsome. He was shingly bald, had a beak nose, tall but very thin. His wife was an exceptionally beautiful woman, so he must have had something going for him. Returning from Kyneton one weekend, we picked up a waitress from the Midland Hotel in Castlemaine. It was a bit of a squeeze in the single-seat Austin 7, as Cedric drove me home to Harcourt. On the way, he asked me for directions to the pine plantation at the foot of Mt. Alexander, about a couple of kilometres directly east of Wahroonga. Apparently, that was where they were heading, after they had dropped me off at our front gate, for a bit of clandestine love-making.

One driving episode, while I was stationed at Kyneton, almost resulted in me rolling a car into a deep valley, with almost certain death for me and my five passengers. A travelling salesman invited our foursome for a drive down to Melbourne one night. He wanted to visit his girlfriend and we could attend a theatre, which we did. He picked us up after the movie, and started to drive us home. When he was clear of the built-up area, about 15km north of the last suburb, the salesman asked me to drive the rest of the way home, because he was tired. His car was big and powerful – a Plymouth, I think – compared to the 7hp and 10hp vehicles I had been driving. Shortly after I took over, the plateau of the Calder Highway gave way to a steep dip down to a bridge at Keilor over the Maribynong River. The steep drop to the bridge involved negotiating a "devil's elbow" similar to the one on the other side of Mt. Alexander. Unfamiliar with the car's power, I went into the bend too fast. The tail started to slide. Instinctively, I "drove by the seat of my pants", lifting my foot off the accelerator, keeping it off the brake. Otherwise, we would have ended up 100 metres below, in the middle of the Chinese market garden bordering the river.

The rest of the drive was a circumspect exhibition of safe driving. However, it was not without further incident. Nearing the end of the journey, at Carlsruhe, after midnight, a young woman emerged from a wooded area, flagging us down. "Don't stop," cried one of the nurses. She explained that in recent weeks, a similar incident had resulted in a modern form of bush-ranger's highway robbery. A few months into my stint at Kyneton, the nurses talked me into accepting an invitation to a woolshed dance. These dances were very popular, because grease from the wool made the floor lightning fast. I told Melva where I was going and she insisted on driving down from Harcourt to accompany me. The dance was on a Friday night, so Melva drove me home to Harcourt after the dance. On the way home, I made a decision, I asked her to marry me.

After Kyneton's work was finished, I am a bit hazy as to how my life progressed. Cedric must have gone off to the war early, for I found myself the one and only meter tester in the branch. I must have been still living at Wahroonga, because I can visualize myself driving my 10hp Ford every day to Castlemaine to work. As I passed through Harcourt proper on the Calder Highway, Melva would be hanging over Claude's front gate, madly waving.

My meter testing laboratory was housed in a shed located in the main Castlemaine sub-station (switchyard, or transformer yard, in other words). I shared the shed with the sub-station operator, Roy Jonasson, who used it as an office.

I could not have been there very long before I was called up for the Army.

chapter nineteen – army life

The Second World War started in September 1939. I was called into the Army early in 1940. I can fix the date roughly, because I was settled into training camp before my 21st birthday, which happened on October 11, 1940.

Strangely, that occasion is fixed in my memory, not because of any party held for me or for any present my fiancée gave me. It was the present my sister Shirley gave me. She gave me a smoker's stand. I had not long started smoking. My Dad had said to me "if you want to smoke, try a pipe. It will be better for you." He obviously thought pipe-smoking would prevent me from drawing the smoke into my lungs (doing the drawback). It did, but it wasn't long before I changed to cigarettes. Foot-slogging route marches, with only five minutes rest break every hour, did not lend itself to pipe-smoking.

I do remember the 21st present that my parents gave me. It was a "Rolls" razor, regarded as the "Rolls Royce" of safety razors. Sadly, it never lived up to its name or reputation. I do not remember any other presents I received.

Before I was called up for army service, an episode occurred that was to colour my relationship with Melva throughout our life together. I had volunteered for the R.A.A.F. (Royal Australian Air Force). When Melva got to hear of it she was furious. I suppose she thought she was going to be a widow before she was married! Anyway, I went up to Bendigo for the RAAF interview. I felt confident that I could pass all the tests, considering my educational background but I knew if I was to fail physically, I would be back in Melva's good books – everything would be better in my love life, and with of the love of my life, at the time.

I was to regret, all my later life, my stance – or lack of it – at that RAAF interview. All was going towards a pass when I abjectly mentioned I had suffered from eczema until the age of 13. I am sure I would have passed that test if I had not mentioned that ailment. My answer took away my self-respect. After the war, and after Melva and I had separated, my father agreed with that assessment.

Strangely enough, some 12 months or so later, I let slip a chance to retrieve that self-respect. My battalion, the 38th, was camped at Midland Junction, just outside Perth in West Australia. The war was not going well for the air forces of Britain and Australia. As a result, an appeal had been launched throughout all the Australian armed services for air crew recruits. Two of my 38th friends, Jack Hammond and Bernie Benstead asked me to join them in volunteering

to transfer to the RAAF in answer to the recruiting campaign. I gave the idea a lot of thought, but again I weakened, perhaps still dreading Melva's reaction, perhaps thinking the RAAF would look up the record of my previous interview and fail me again. Perhaps I should mention here that my younger sister, Betty (Elizabeth Joy) and I suffered every summer with eczema. In my case, a Chinese herbalist cured me as I entered my teens. He produced a number of herbs which Mum had to boil up. I had to drink the foul-smelling liquid. What was left of the herbs was made into a pack and bound on to the eczema-affected parts of my body.



The failed RAAF interview left me open to being called up for compulsory service in the Australian Army. Maybe it was all for the better, because through that service I became known to the fellow soldier who was influential in my becoming a journalist in later life. (Melva did not support my ambition to be a writer of some sort, so the determination to be true to my own self at that late stage helped to restore my self-respect).

I had little to do with this soldier throughout my army life. His name was Bob Loudon. Before being called up, Bob was a journalist on the Castlemaine Mail. His working hours were such that it was well into the early hours of the morning before he got to bed. That meant that reveille at 6.30, which was bad enough for the rest of us, was devastating for him. So much so, that he was duly penalized for being last on roll-call parade. The penalty involved emptying the "rose bowls", drums spaced evenly along the tent lines for those troops needing to empty their bladders during the night. Bob automatically went to the nearest "bowl" to the roll-call parade, waiting for the second last on parade to join him in lifting the heavy, usually full, "bowls".

Bob, being a journalist, thereby being judged intelligent, soon became the battalion headquarters intelligence sergeant. Clearly, the battalion, and consequently the headquarters, commander, Captain Caldwell, had his head screwed on correctly. Apart from giving Bob his due, he allocated me to the signals platoon. Thus he went against the army trend of changing truck-drivers into cooks, etc.

By way of explanation, Dad, being a signaller in World War One, had taught me, Shirley and Ivan Morse code, and how to send it by sounder, flags and signalling lamp. Indeed, he had endeavoured to teach all of the Harcourt North Boy Scouts and Cubs the code. I can still visualize him saying: "Don't learn by opposites...don't think of "b" being dah-dit-dit-dit and "v" being dit-dit-dit-dah...don't think of "a" being dit-dah and "n" being dah-dit." (The dits being dots and the dahs being dashes – the sounds the dots and dashes made during radio broadcasts ... or by field telephone during the war. The sounds changed if using lamps or the chattering Morse telephones, as in railway stations...that way the dots became "iddy" and the dashes became "umpty"... "a" became iddy-umpty and "n" became umpty-iddy. He taught us always to say iddy-umpty, etc., when using a Morse key, because that is the sound it makes. Therefore, I was thoroughly grounded in Morse code, a useful requirement for the signals platoon.



My father rarely showed any emotion such as love for his children – anger, yes, for any misdemeanour – but love, no. However, I detected a faint measure of pride when, on my first leave, I was wearing on the sleeve of my tunic, the crossed flags of a signaller.

In between the time of first entering camp and my first leave, my father-in-law to be, Claude Wilson, had lost his sight. Apparently, he was up on the roof of his house – "Melvyn", named for his two children, Melva and Vincent – attempting to repair it, when he fell. He hit his head on the ground, causing blindness.

I used to lead him on walks around the neighbourhood. On one of these walks, he gently chided me for taking liberties with his daughter. He promised me all sorts of punishment if she became pregnant before marriage. I mainly stayed with the Wilsons while on leave. Nature took its course between a betrothed couple. Quiet as we tried to be, Ma and Pa Wilson were obviously aware of our goings-on. The out walls may have been solid granite blocks, but the inner walls were not so sound-proof.

When Claude talked of punishment, I visualized him thinking of the degrees of that punishment meted out by the Masonic Lodge for disclosing its secrets. I had just joined the Castlemaine lodge, Mount Alexander No.8, at Claude's invitation or instigation. I had only attended a few meetings and, as it turned out, those few were the only meetings I was ever to attend. After the war, I was always strapped for cash and could not afford the subscriptions needed to remain financial. In any case, I was not enamoured with the ritual involved in Masonry. However, I do acknowledge the benefits gained throughout my life by membership, financial or otherwise. I also acknowledge the undeserved, revengeful punishment meted out for crossing a worshipful brother. However, the alleged fault on my part will remain one of Masonry's secrets.

Blind although Claude was, and frail with it, there was little tender loving care in that household. He developed a habit of picking at his face, his lips in particular. Whenever he did, his wife, Meta, would hold forth "Claude, stop it". Claude would "stop it" for about five minutes, then start again. "Stop it, Claude", would be heard again. No allowance would be made for his illness; no endeavour made to learn why he was picking at his face. He told me he could feel insects crawling on his face and he was trying to pick them off.

He was a good man, holding a position of major importance in the community. Because of Claude's importance in the community, Meta gained a false impression of her social standing. She only socialized with people who in her mind were of the upper crust, such as Colonel and Mrs. Bill Lang. Meta could be a bit of a snob.

Melva and I were married on October 4, 1941, with all the pomp and circumstance that Meta could command. The ceremony was at the Castlemaine Presbyterian Church and the reception at a leading Castlemaine hotel. We spent our honeymoon at a hotel in Mornington, highlighted by the fact that Melva's fur cape, of which she was inordinately proud, was stolen. The battalion was camped nearby, at Mt. Martha, at the time. Following the honeymoon, I found accommodation within a kilometre of the camp for Melva and I stayed nights with her, returning to camp in the mornings in time for Reveille.



I was transferred to a Bren-gun carrier (a light-weight, very mobile, track-driven armoured vehicle) platoon. After training with the platoon (formerly the Vickers machine-gun platoon of Headquarters Company) and the newly acquired carrier vehicles, I was promoted to platoon sergeant. From the carrier- training camp at Cranbourne, south of Melbourne like Mt Martha, I entered a machine-gunnery officer training course at Bonegilla, near Albury, going from the far south of the state to the far north. I was billeted with a brute of a sergeant-major, who never left me in peace long enough to study properly. Maybe that was part of the scheme to see how I coped under difficult conditions. Through my successful education, I should have been able to master the theory of trajectory, etc, not have any difficulty with answering examination questions. However, apparently I failed. I was never commissioned as an officer, doomed to remain in non-commissioned ranks, although I was never told the results of the officer-course.

In the meantime, my carrier platoon had rejoined the battalion at Mt. Martha and the whole of the 38th had been shifted to Midland Junction in West Australia. To rejoin the unit, I travelled in a transport truck cabin on a flatbed railway truck across the Nullarbor Plains. The train broke down on the plain and we were stranded for two days out in the Never-Never. We were treated to an Aboriginal corroboree by a tribe camped nearby. The Aboriginal women offered their bodies to all and sundry, standing by the rail tracks and calling to the

soldiers leaning out of the carriage windows "Two bob jig-a-jig". ("Two bob" was Australian slang for "two shillings"-20 cents in today's currency.). I have no idea if any of the soldiers took up the offers.

I was severely reprimanded by an officer when I had my photo taken with one of the male Aborigines. I had the temerity to place my forearm on the dark-skinned one's shoulder while the photo was being taken.



On arrival at Blackboy Hill, Midland Junction, the site of the unit, I was given a pineapple as a sort of "welcome home" present by one of my platoon. A farmer – plantation owner – had given the platoon the run of his property. The boys made too much of a good thing, with the resultant line-up the next morning at the RAP (Regimental Aid Post- first aid tent) of men with bleeding mouths. Badly peeled pineapples have that effect! My visit to the RAP was compounded by an ear problem. While sleeping on the ground, as we were doing in our temporary bivouac, an insect had crept into my ear. I could not dislodge it. So I had a double reason for going on sick parade.

Attendance at that sick parade eventually landed me in an army hospital. The RAP orderly tried to kill that insect and float it out of the ear with drops from a liquid filled syringe. The trouble was he had the proportions of killer fluid and flotation liquid reversed. As a result, the larger-than-necessary quantity of killer fluid – an acid – burnt a hole in my ear drum and, as it overflowed out of the ear, the skin on my cheek. The hospital was nearer and a little south of Perth. I heard there were a lot of wildflowers, including kangaroo-paw, in swampland nearby, but I did not get the opportunity to visit the area. In the ten days or so I was in hospital, the doctors plugged the eardrum hole and cured the facial burn, but I have had degrees of deafness in that ear ever since then, getting progressively worse over the years. I have now reached the stage where hearing aids are necessary for one-on-one conversations, but the aids are useless in crowded situations, even as a member of an audience where speakers are assisted by microphones and public address systems.

Our church minister, Rev. John Martin, is trying to get the property committee to install a "loop" audio system in the church. This would allow us "deafies" in the congregation to follow the sermon. I have sat in a corresponding "loop" area of the Sydney Opera House during performances of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and it works, all extraneous sound is cut out, leaving a clear rendition of the words as sung.

Our next campsite was at Geraldton, halfway up the coast of West Australia. On the way up there, transport platoon commander, Captain Brown, "commandeered" two potato sacks full of crayfish from the nearby fishing village of Dongara, famous nationwide for this delicacy. We in the carrier platoon joined our transport colleagues in a campfire feast. After becoming settled in at our new camp, crayfish salad became the usual Sunday lunch for two of us at a Geraldton hotel. My opposite number in the mortar platoon, Sgt. Ron Lacy, and I regularly rode in on Ron's army-supplied motor-bike...well, I could hardly have driven a carrier and parked it in front of the pub, could I? After lunch, we would make trunk line (STD) calls to our respective wives back in Victoria.



Before going to Geraldton, I, along with the majority of the 38th Battalion, had volunteered to join the 2nd AIF (Australian Infantry Force), making us eligible to serve as soldiers anywhere in the world. Before that time, we were part of the AMF (Australian Military Force) and known as "Choco's" (chocolate soldiers), because we were restricted to serving within Australian territory. Almost coincidental with this change of status, I had the second chance – and again knocked it back – to join the RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force).

Our Bren-gun carrier platoon's service at Geraldton was notable for three incidents- a suspected contact with the enemy, the death of a villainous carrier driver, and his co-villain driver showing great initiative.

Like all the platoons in the battalion, we took part in a coastal watch along the shoreline emanating north and south of Geraldton. One night our coastguard squad spotted a light out to sea. It was only dim, but a light it was, possibly a cigarette. On being challenged, the perpetrator of the light chose to ignore our squad. That was enough for our troops. They let fly with Bren guns and the heavier Vickers. The light went out and whoever initiated it quickly disappeared. After being reported, the powers-that-be considered the incident was caused by illegal fishermen.

I have been told one must not speak ill of the dead, but the driver who died, by the name of Plowright (I have forgotten his first name), was such a cantankerous soldier that I found it hard to deal with him. He frequently disobeyed or, rather, ignored orders. This characteristic actually led to his death. He was on a training exercise. I was not on the exercise, so I can only rely on second-hand accounts of events as they occurred.

His mates told me that Plowright chose his own spot on the perimeter of the encampment to sleep rather than the area designated by the platoon commander. An alarm was raised; all but Plowright boarded the carriers and, led by the commander, the carriers dispersed, one running over the missing driver. Except for his lack of discipline, he was one of the best – possibly the best – driver we had. As an example, he was one of only a very few who could change gears without ever using the clutch. He could drive standing up at the wheel. When he needed to change gear, he would use the accelerator to adjust the engine revolutions to the correct sound of the motor and kick the short floor-level gear lever into the correct gear of the "crash-box" with never a protesting sound.

Plowright had been bad enough, but the real villain of the platoon was his mate, Terry Yanner. Swarthy, chubby and tubby, always dirty, always appearing in need of a wash, shave and haircut, Terry went out of his way to do the opposite of what he was required to do. He was on an exercise inland from Northampton, north-east of Geraldton when his carrier became bogged. I was, as usual, "confined to barracks" while the lieutenant ran the exercise, so, again, I had to rely on the troops for information. The boggy patch was adjacent to a low embankment which carried a railway line, narrow-gauge, I think. Spotting a train approaching, Terry clambered up onto the line and proceeded to stop the train. After explaining his predicament, Terry convinced the train driver to back the train up the line a bit and unhitch the engine. Meanwhile, Terry commandeered a number of towropes which are standard equipment on all carriers. He then guided the train engine to a position just forward of his stranded carrier, connected the towropes and urged the train driver to pull his stricken vehicle out of the bog. His efforts were successful.

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After Geraldton, we were brought back as a unit, to Nagambie, in Victoria, near Seymour, the camp where we first trained. This second time around, Melva came to join me and we found rooms with an old woman who lived alone in a substantial brick home. She practically lived on pickled onions as a diet. Obviously, she must have had other food, but pickled onions featured predominately and she bestowed them on us generously.

chapter twenty – Darwin bound...and bombed

We were only in Nagambie for R-and-R (Rest and Recreation), so it was only a matter of a few weeks before we were on the move again. This time we were heading for Darwin, or at least most of us were, with all of us making a stopover at Canungra, the jungle training camp.

We went via the east coast. It was the first time I had crossed the Murray River into New South Wales and Sydney was a revelation to me – probably to most of us – although we saw little of the city. Confined, as we were to Central Station area, the noticeably more relaxed lifestyle soon made an impression. One refreshment kiosk at the station fascinated us, constantly attracting spectators. The young girl attendants poured yards of milk shakes from one container to another.

Brisbane Railway Station was more mundane, more primitive in those days. However, it was in the Brisbane area, generally speaking, that we got our first taste of jungle warfare. We had a week in the rain-forest of Mount Tambourine, overlooking what was to become the Gold Coast. (I never knew the training camp there as Canungra, but I think it was that feared place). Here, we had our first experience of being under fire of live ammunition, bullets and grenades.

Although we, as trainees, were not issued with live ammunition, it was on these exercises that I learned the value of self-control when firing a rifle while under attack. The instructors hid in trees like Japanese snipers and they were using live ammunition, but deliberately aiming for near-misses. When we spotted a would-be Jap sniper, we had to aim and pretend to shoot. Holding my breath while taking the first trigger pressure became doubly important when one shot – and one shot only – made the difference between kill and being killed.

After Tambourine, we had a day at Redcliff, out Ipswich way as I recall, for training, too, with live ammunition. This time it was us, as machine-gunners, using the live ammo. We had to fire over the top of troops ahead of us but going away, advancing towards the enemy. As our troops moved further away, getting closer to the enemy, we had to raise our sights to avoid hitting those in the forefront of the advancing line. For a first-time effort, it was a nerve-wracking experience.

Leaving the Brisbane area, we made our way up to Townsville and Rockhampton. Here, to the amazement of us southerners, we saw trains being driven along the centre of the main

street. To some of us, it appeared as if we had been transported to America's Wild West. We could not believe there were no fences or any other device protecting humans and animals, let alone cars and trucks, from being run into or over by the trains.

In this area, we came across our first cane fields. Frequently, we saw narrow-gauge railroads alongside the roads we were travelling on. Occasionally, we saw "puffing-billy" engines pulling trains of flatbed trucks loaded with sugar cane. Signs alongside the railway at road and footpath crossings warned the train drivers "Beware of pedestrians." To our way of thinking – mine, at least – the pedestrians down south had to beware of the trains, not the other way around.

Eventually, we journeyed up to Kuranda Railway Station, on the edge of Atherton Tablelands. This narrow-gauge train trip is very picturesque, but not without its problems. Emerging from a tunnel, onto a high trestle bridge, the engine-driver had to drop sand on the tracks to get enough grip on the rails to regain traction. From the same trestle bridge, we gained a spectacular view of Barron Falls, in full flow. Kuranda Railway Station was then-and still is now- worthy of attracting tourist attention.

Leaving Kuranda, swapping rail for motor transport, we had our first experience of American transport drivers, mostly Negroes. A hair-raising drive around mountainous hairpin bends deposited us, thankfully, at our campsite on the edge of true jungle. This campsite was designed to give us experience of jungle life. Armed with machetes, as well as our normal packs and rifles, we had to find our way from "A" to "C" by way of "B" by means of map and compass, with yours truly leading the way. It was genuine jungle, with barbed "wait-awhile" vines catching our clothes, and flesh; leeches fastening on and adding to the torture of bare flesh.

I had my first meal of grilled snake at Kuranda. Tommy Knighton, our HQ company cook, was given a carpet snake to cook. It was tasty, something like grilled fish. It was here, too, when on manoeuvres in the jungle at night, that I first saw myriads of fireflies darting about. Apart from jungle treks, we went on a route march through very rough country to a mountain overlooking the cane fields around Cairns. Then we had a few days on the sea-shore practicing beach landings from motorized barges.

To those who wondered about all of this training – and that applied to most of us – we had no doubts concerning where we were heading- the jungle of New Guinea. As usual in the army, when one becomes reconciled to any course of action, the opposite becomes the norm. So we were loaded on to transport vehicles heading for outback Queensland.

On our first night in the dusty transit camp, a burly sergeant-major laid down the law for us in no uncertain terms. He finished off his harangue to us by inviting all of us to the two-up game he ran down behind the bore-water showers. In this unlikely environment – dust, heat, flies – the heroic 39th Infantry Battalion, of Kokoda Trail fame, was borne. So, about 30 percent of us were right about their final destination – New Guinea. For the rest of us, the Pacific war, as far as Australia was involved, had opened up another front – Darwin was being bombed and we were heading for it. Instead of all the 38th Battalion proceeding to the jungles of New Guinea, only a small part of the unit was to put into practice all of our recent training. The rest of us were destined to provide army ground protection for a RAAF squadron of Spitfires.



The 39th was formed by soldiers relegated from the 38th, 6th and 8th battalions. My distant relation, whom I knew as a cousin, Frank Warren, came from one of our other companies and asked me to claim him as a relation so he could remain in the 38th. Close relations could request to be kept together. However, the relationship was too distant in this case – I did put in a formal request, but without success. I have always felt that Frank never forgave my failure. In hindsight, I could have volunteered to join the 39th, although it had not been a process of volunteering – far from it – it was pure relegation, or, if you like, delegation. Had I

volunteered, and been accepted, I would have had a more satisfying active service. However, Darwin was declared an active service area after it was bombed. Hence, I am able to call myself a returned soldier and gain all the benefits of a veteran.

So, the majority of the battalion headed for Darwin, leaving the rest to head for New Guinea and glory. After staging for a few days at Adelaide River, we settled in at the "38 Mile" (various establishments and incidents were known as happening at the mileage from Darwin towards Alice Springs). Our camp was appropriately at the same mileage as our unit number "38". Providing another coincidence, led by our battalion commander Captain Caldwell, we were the ground troop protection for the RAAF Spitfire squadron led by fighter ace, "Killer" Caldwell.

During the staging process at Adelaide River, we had to make our own camp, complete with slit trenches into which we had to scramble during bombing raids. To make up for the loss of troops to the 39th, we had just been reinforced by a number of troops from north-western New South Wales. They were camped on low hill where it was impractical to dig trenches due to rocky outcrops, so the slit trenches were dug at the foot of the hill. The intervening area between the tents and trenches was strewn with gibbers, stones, mostly round and wind worn found usually in desert areas. During the first air-raid, these recruits jumped out of their beds and scampered, fleet of foot, down the hill, over these gibbers, into the trenches. We "veterans" were amused to see them picking and choosing their way back across these stones after the raid had ended.

These air-raids were mostly made on bright moonlight nights. We could see the Japanese bombers approaching Darwin. It has only occurred to me since I started this chapter that the approach was made from the *south*. Maybe they had avoided directly approaching Darwin from the north to avoid the anti-aircraft gunfire until they were on target. The raids were not restricted to Darwin. Broome and Wyndham were also bombed, as were airfields around and near Adelaide River. However, the Spitfire airfield at the 38 Mile was never bombed. This was fortunate for the 38th, as well as the Spitfire squadron, because we would have suffered severe casualties. One reason for the lack of attention by the Japanese would possibly be that they never knew it was there; or because they ignored the night-fighter capability of the Spitfires.

If the Japanese were not aware of the Spitfire air-field, it could be due to it being designed as part of the main Adelaide River-to-Darwin main road. The road was widened for a length sufficiently long enough for the Spitfires to take-off and land. The widened road thus became the air-strip. On one of our trips to Darwin proper, our convoy was halted to allow a Spitfire to take off. Camouflage of the air-field was intense. The minimum of trees were removed; just sufficient to allow the planes to move off the strip to reach their revetments. Camouflage nets were strung between the trees. Tents and buildings, like the cookhouse, were camouflaged and additional nets were strung where appropriate.



The bombing of Darwin was a bit hairy-scary. On one occasion, we were camped in the former navy barracks, which were small one room buildings on "stilts". They were raised on high stumps to allow the hot tropical air to cool down somewhat. On our first night there, the Japs gave us a welcome. We watched the searchlights catch a bomber, listened to and saw the ack-ack (anti-aircraft) shells burst before our night-fighters got among them. Then the bombs started dropping and we raced down the steps to the slit trenches. One sergeant, Max McLean, a Harcourt man, decided it would be quicker jumping out the window instead of using the steps. He didn't count on the wire clothes line strung outside the window. It acted like the bow of a bow-and-arrow, Max becoming the arrow and being shot back against the barracks wall. Others appeared to be diving into the local swimming pool, because the trenches still contained left-over water from the usual afternoon tropical downpour.

The Japs always aimed for the water pipe-line as one of their main targets. They attempted to straddle the pipe-line with a bracket of bombs. During the morning after this particular raid it was discovered that one more bomb in the bracket would have demolished our barracks.



While in the Darwin area, the army treated me to some leave. This time, instead of the roundabout route through Brisbane and Sydney, I travelled via Alice Springs, Oodnadatta and Adelaide. Having crossed the continent from east to west earlier, this gave me a north-south crossing – a crisscross effect. Darwin to Alice Springs was made, necessarily, by motor transport; the middle part of the journey to Adelaide was made by the famous Ghan train. The last part was more civilized, riding in the normal Adelaide-Melbourne passenger train. A distinguishing feature of the motor transport section was the fly-trap of buildings in which we had meals. The fly-trap comprised a short dark passage where you entered one door, complete with a curtain of floor length strips, from the outside and became immediately confronted by another door-curtain combination. The theory was based on the flies being scattered off our backs by the curtains and the dark intervening space. It mainly worked, but we had to be wary of a fly or two trying to beat us to our meals.

At Alice Springs, we visited the open-air theatre, the one and only theatre in the town. Here, we experienced our first instance of segregation in our country. An area was set aside for the Aborigines, and they were not allowed to sit anywhere else. The theatre was just like normal theatre which we had been used to in our towns, except it had no roof. It was not to be confused with the later “open-air” theatres, alternatively called “drive-in” theatres, where people sat in cars to watch the screen. Sadly, with the advent of television and videos, even that more modern mode is vanishing.

As ever, getting back home to loved ones and civilization was a wonderful treat, especially because I was renewing acquaintance with my relatively new wife, Melva, with whom I was still madly in love, remaining so for some few more years to come. The contrast between my army life and civil life on leave would have been much more dramatic if I had been in action, shooting and being shot at, but, at this young age, I didn't think about that difference. So, the days of bliss sped by and soon I was on the way back by the same route as I had arrived.

At Oodnadatta, on the return journey, we were advised there would be a slight delay while the train engine took on water. Those of us who were so inclined were allowed to visit the hotel, which was one of only two commercial buildings comprising the town, the other being a general store. Immediately the train stopped, the majority of troops made a beeline for the pub, crossing the sand of the desert, the dirt track that comprised the street, scattering the multitude of goats that were our only welcoming visitors. Not having touched a drop of liquor at this stage of my life, I remained in the train, securing a much prized seat instead of facing the possibility of remaining standing for the rest of the journey to Alice Springs.

At the Alice, we again visited the open-air theatre, the Aborigines still sat, as if they had not moved, on the banks of the Todd River, in which the water still did not flow. I would have liked to have seen Ayres Rock, as Uluru was then still named, but I have never felt inclined to make a special trip to see it in later years.



After returning to the Darwin area, to keep us troops busy, there being no war to fight there, we were set the task of building a non-denominational church from native timber. It was constructed for the use of the battalion in which to hold church parades. In effect, apart from having a roof, it was more open than the open-air theatre in Alice Springs. The walls were nothing more than “paling” fences, five or six feet high, with a gap of two or three feet

between the fence top and the roof. "Palings" were limbs of pandanus trees set upright, giving a log cabin appearance, except that the logs, about three inches in diameter, were vertical instead of horizontal. The roof was thatched with the palm-like pandanus leaves. There were no doors, only doorways. The final appearance was one of a native hut type building as seen in New Guinea, Singapore or Malaysia, except on ground level, not on stilts as most of those were. The floor of our building remained hard-packed dirt, which, if memory serves me correctly, was made by demolishing magnetic anthills and pounding the broken down material into the existing soil. (The surrounding district was dotted with these anthills, which stood about two metres high. They were flat-sided, triangular in cross-section, with the pointed end facing magnetic north and the flat end, some 30 to 50 centimetres across, consequently facing south).

Wood-cutting squads roamed the area to provide the pandanus and blood-wood logs for the building. The blood-wood, providing the wall posts and other heavy-bearing timbers, was the hardest, toughest wood I have ever had to cut with an axe. It got its name from the blood-red sap which wept from every successful blow of the axe. As the sergeant-in-charge of a squad, I could easily have stood aside and watched the troops struggling with their axes, but I really enjoyed joining in the exercise. Apart from the building material, the blood-wood provided the wood for the battalion kitchen fires.



When the Japs were on the run, towards the end of 1944 and into 1945, the 38th was withdrawn from the Darwin area. For some of us, the 38th Battalion became a distant memory, fading more dimly as the years pass. In the original draft of these memoirs, I wrote that the battalion became a shattered and scattered unit. However, I have learned that it still retains its Bendigo-based identity, with reunions held periodically, probably around Anzac Day each year. For some of us, the scattering took us to New South Wales, as recruit instructors.

Melva was again able to join me, as in our Nagambie days. Fortunately, too, particularly for Melva's sake, we were able to renew a friendship with a couple that had been kindled at Nagambie. They were Sergeant Keith Ash, also of the 38th, and his wife, Kathleen. Keith, in private life, had been the registrar of Bendigo Technical College.

As recruit instructors, Keith and I travelled to camps at Balgownie and Cowra in NSW, Kathleen and Melva coming with us. My memory fails to record which camp came first, but it was probably Balgownie, because I distinctly remember VJ Day occurring at Cowra. VJ Day was the day when Japan surrendered after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That was the first day I had tasted alcoholic beverage – wine in this case. So, I will leave the Cowra story until later.

Balgownie was a coal-mining area at the foot of the Wollongong escarpment. I occasionally saw a coal-blackened miner returning home from his shift. Far from the ravaged country depicted in stories of the coal-mining areas of Wales and England's north, Balgownie was a virtual rain forest. We didn't see miners living in hovels: houses were neat and tidy on their quarter-acre blocks of land. I suppose there was a pit face and coal dumps but we did not see any.

The "parade-ground" we used was a rugby league ground hacked out of the virgin bush. The "recruits" who suffered under our instruction were college students. They were in awe of their "war-toughened" soldier instructors. We had a third member of our group, a Scandinavian by the name of Gunter, who may or may not have been war-toughened. Keith and I definitely were not. Gunter also had his wife with him. The three women made the most of their close quarters; neither Keith nor I was able to get through to Gunter.

My instructing suffered somewhat from hastily prepared lessons. However, the three of us got by, in such matters as teaching the college boys the art of pulling machine guns apart and putting them together again. If I remember rightly, there were only the three instructors,

but there must have been someone more senior (we were all sergeants) to organize the “bullring”. The “bullring” comprised lecture squads scattered over the parade ground to which the groups of recruits travelled in progressive order. I wonder sometimes if our lessons did any good for the college boys. Perhaps the discipline imposed helped them to accept the school discipline when they returned to complete their education. I wonder, too, if I have ever crossed paths with any of them unbeknownst in my public life as a journalist.



The Cowra experience was much more serious. We were actually training raw recruits who would possibly be facing the enemy if the war continued long enough. Here, too, that enemy broke out of a prisoner-of-war compound that bordered our training school just before we arrived for our tour of duty. The hill behind our training area was the site where many Japanese were gunned down after they broke through the fence line. There exists today a memorial monument in a Japanese style garden near the site in remembrance of the occasion. All the remaining prisoners-of-war had been transferred to other prisons before we arrived at the 1st Australian Infantry Training School.

Melva and Kathleen came with us to Cowra. Melva and I had lodgings with an old duck who thought she was a magpie. She had a pet magpie. Melva and I could see her from our room, in her room, talking incessantly to it. At least we were spared eating pickled onions, as happened with our landlady at Nagambie. We certainly attracted the eccentric in owners of rooms to let.

Keith and I ended up as the most unlikely of unarmed combat instructors; Keith because he was just not a sporting type; I because, although I played cricket and football, let alone my boxing experience with the Scouts, I was not an aggressive person. We were trained by a professional wrestler named “King” Elliott. He singled me out to demonstrate a somersault-and-strangle throw. When it came to the strangle part of the exercise, I actually thought I was going to die. His experience in the ring allowed him to apply the maximum pressure with the minimum danger, apart from frightening the life out of me.

Anyway, we passed muster – Keith and I became exponents of unarmed combat.

Each of us sergeant-instructors had a hut full of recruits to control. As each curriculum of training concluded, before the recruits scattered to their ordained units, it was the custom that each hut threw a party for their sergeant. I had enjoyed one such celebration, and was halfway to the next, when the Japs threw in the towel. That VJ Day (Victory over the Japanese) was the day when my rookies passed the wine bottle to me on its way around the hut.

From Cowra, in the initial routine stages of discharge from the army, I was transferred to a staging camp at Rooty Hill. It was located on Wallgrove Road, the next parallel road to Ferrers Road, Horsley Park. This was where my wife, Bet, Wendy and I were to arrive some 26 or so years later, from where Wendy was married and where Bet and I lived a total of 24 years.

I was ultimately discharged, honourably, from the army after an uneventful war at Princes Park, Carlton Victoria, on November 8, 1945.

chapter twenty one – war and the family

As I have possibly previously mentioned, Dad couldn't rest on his laurels gained in World War One; he just had to contribute service in World War Two.

His war effort, second time around, was to act as tool store man at Thompson's Foundry, in Castlemaine. Goodness knows how he got the job. I suppose it was advertised, he applied and was awarded it. There was a scarcity of applicants, no doubt, as the younger generation was otherwise engaged. It meant, however, a long bicycle ride of some 12 or 13 kilometres each way, and shift work. How he managed to work the orchard between shifts remains a mystery to me. It certainly took its toll on his physical well-being and undoubtedly hastened his death.

Throughout the war, Mum continued to do what she had always done – look after the family. My younger sister, Elizabeth Joy (Betty, even Bet), was still at home, aged 18 at war's end, not "flying the coop" to Melbourne until the world had returned to a semblance of sanity. After doing all the daily chores of a farmer's wife, Mum, more often than not, burned the midnight oil, writing to her three children in the armed services. In this way, she kept the family together though hundreds and thousands of miles apart – a role that has now fallen on the shoulders of her youngest daughter.

Shirley had already "flown the coop" before the war started. She was "in service" of a different kind- housework service, as a housemaid to a well-to-do couple. The husband was the Australian representative of a British memory-training organization, Pelmanism. I remember visiting her, at their home, during my early meter testing training at Richmond.

Shirley wasted little time getting into the Women's Australian Air Force. She was immediately in demand because of her knowledge and expertise of Morse code, gained from Dad and honed sharply by the Harcourt railway station master. Shirley was based in Queensland's north, Townsville I think, keeping in radio contact with the bombers and fighter aircraft operating over New Guinea. It was a harrowing task, at times, when she lost contact with the pilots and they did not return to base. It was during her service in Queensland that she met her future husband, Bill Allen, who was a serviceman, but not aircrew.

My brother, Ivan, at long last achieved his ambition to be a pilot, after a continually frustrating argument with Dad. Right from our early childhood days, playing and swaying in the breeze atop our aeroplane tree over in Douglas's paddock, Ivan dreamt of being a

really, truly pilot. The war gave him the opportunity to turn that dream into reality. However, he had firstly to overcome Dad's opposition to his joining the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). I still don't know if Ivan wore down that opposition or if he simply became old enough at 18 on the 28th of February, 1941, to act on his own initiative. In those days, there was still a hangover in thinking that boys became men only on reaching the ripe old age of 21. The war soon altered that approach to life.

In Ivan's case, after flight training, in Deniliquin he was transferred to the battlefield in England. Here, he flew Halifax bombers over Germany, earning himself the Distinguished Flying Cross, twice (DFC with bar). He was on his second tour of duty when the war ended. On his return to civil life, he opted to remain in his job with the State Electricity Commission of Victoria, giving away his flying career. With the SEC, he rose to become a branch manager.

Younger sister, Betty, would only have been 12 when the war started in 1939, and 18 when the war ended in 1945. So the war's only effect on her was that of being a schoolgirl in wartime, being Mum's only helper, keeping in touch with her older siblings. Her letters to me were always a highlight of my day. Knowing my fondness for words, she actually made up a crossword for me to solve. Later in life, I think she gained a false impression of my so-called expertise with words to the detriment of her letter-writing. I think any sense of my success as a journalist inhibited her as a letter-writer. That is a pity, because she wrote lovely letters. Despite my telling her so over the years, it has not encouraged her to put pen to paper. Betty more than makes up for her lack of correspondence with her regular 3pm Sunday telephone call to me.

Life for my new wife, Melva, could not have been as wonderful and romantic as she would have pictured marriage in her girlish and adolescent years. Perhaps there were shades of romance as a sort of camp follower, but there was none of the security that a young girl would look forward to in married life. And the Wilson family was strong on security, Melva and her mother, Meta, particularly. Melva wrote loving letters on a regular basis, at least once a week, looking forward to a stable life once this war was over. Alas, this was not to be.

chapter twenty two – unsettled civilian life

The State Electricity Commission of Victoria had guaranteed ex-servicemen employees that their jobs would be held for them on return to civil life. So, civilian life, for me, became a return to meter testing as a means of providing for my young wife and, hopefully, future family.

For the record, during my army service I had joined the Masonic Lodge at Castlemaine (Mt. Alexander No. 8). However, as life unfolded, I could no longer afford the dues, or the time to attend meetings. Despite my lack of membership, I consider Masonry has watched over me throughout my entire life. I am very grateful for Claude Wilson, who originally sponsored me, and to all those other anonymous members who have guided my footsteps and smoothed my way through my subsequent life.

While I was satisfied to take up the life of a meter tester again, I became frustrated with living conditions. As a born-again meter tester, the S.E.C. powers-that-be ordained I should return to civil life at the department's Richmond headquarters where I had first been initiated into the rites of the occupation. I was destined, so far as the department was concerned, to stay in the Melbourne metropolitan area forever. So far as I know, there was no meter testing done in any of the branches ever again.

After a refresher tour of duty in the laboratory, I was sent out in the field, testing meters *in situ* (on site), door to door. This was similar to the work I did pre-war with Cedric Stephenson, except we had to travel to the suburb being attacked by train rather than by an Austin Seven single-seat car. As had happened pre-war, I was accompanied for a few weeks by a colleague more experienced in testing on site. After those weeks, I was let loose on my own.

I enjoyed meeting the various house-holders, working outdoors in the various suburbs. In the process, I caught a couple of power cheats. In both instances, a fine hole had been drilled in the top of the meter cover. A fine wire, such as fairly rigid piano wire, had been dropped through the hole and allowed to drag on the revolving disc. This acted as a brake, slowing the disc, thus registering a lot less power than that actually being used. The wire was not in place while I was on the site, so I was not involved in the ensuing legal process. I simply reported the situation. I do know that the fine holes and fine wires resulted in fines having to be paid by the offenders.

While I did enjoy my daily labours, my domestic arrangements left a lot to be desired.

I had no money.

The money the army gave me on discharge soon disappeared in daily living. I had no bank deposit to back up my weekly pay packet. We lived from day to day. I could not begin to purchase land or a home.

"Home" came to mean other peoples' home - Melva's relations' homes. First it was the home of Melva's cousin, Margaret, and her husband, Wally Rattray. Next, it was the home of Melva's Auntie Gina. Then it was Auntie Ada's home - both aunties being the sisters of Melva's mother, Meta.

Although she was living with relatives, it was hard on Melva, living in the homes of other people, sharing the cooking arrangements and other domestic chores. By the time we came to live with Auntie Ada, we had become the parents of a bonny girl, Barbara, born on May 4, 1947. She was born in an Elsternwick hospital, across the road from another of Melva's aunts, May, the third of Meta Wilson's sisters. As my first-born, Barbara and I had an immediate rapport. It lasts to this day, despite a separation lasting from her early childhood to her being married and a mother.

In an attempt to alleviate the frustration of ex-servicemen's lack of housing the Australian Labor Party in Victoria started a co-operative home building scheme. Under this scheme, the ex-servicemen provided the labour; the ALP provided the material and the supervision. I think the land was found and allocated by the party. All costs - land, material, supervision - were financed by the Labor Party.

After joining the co-operative, I found myself owning land in Warrigal Road, Moorabbin. The houses were to be built with concrete bricks, necessitating concrete foundations in trenches under the walls. There were no slab floors in those days; there were no truck-mounted revolving cement mixers delivering and pouring factory-prepared concrete. All cement for the foundations and the laying of bricks was mixed on site. This mixing was done by shovelling sand and cement into small concrete mixers in the correct proportions, adding water and turning on the electric motor driven machines. These mixers delivered a couple of cubic feet of concrete, not cubic metres as the modern machines do. Filling the trenches was a laborious job.

After the foundations of our group's houses were completed, there came a series of delays in the supply of bricks and timber. During the recent war years, fewer houses were being built. The nation, as a whole, had different priorities. Bombs and bullets had priority before bricks and buildings. The timber mills and brick kilns had a lot of catching up to do. Therefore, all building materials were in short supply.

As is the general case, those people with the ready money were served first. Ex-servicemen with little money were not in the race. Delays stretched into months. Eventually, I became so frustrated I decided to attack the problem differently. I saw an advertisement for a house auction in Croydon, as far away from Moorabbin as I could get. The house was on a couple of acres of land (about a hectare in today's measurement). That appealed to me, as a young man brought up in the country- "You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy", as the saying goes. The need for a home of our own was becoming increasingly urgent, because by this time we had become a family of four- Judith making an appearance as Barbara's sister.

Not telling Melva of my plans, I attended the auction and put in the highest bid, not knowing where I could find the money. I had a vague idea that a war service home loan could be obtained. I wrote to Mum and Dad explaining what I had done. Dad came down to Melbourne. I took him out to Croydon to look at the house and land. While there, Dad said he would help and disclosed that he had twenty thousand pounds (\$40,000) in the bank.

My first thought was: "Poor Mum. All that money available and the conditions she had to endure. A tenth of that money would have gone a long way to make her life more enjoyable." My second thought was: "Why hadn't Dad offered to help me earlier. He must have known I was struggling." My third thought was: "Well, everything is OK now. We will work something out."

Something was worked out: I obtained a War Service Home Loan and was able to pay Dad back.

The house was an old-fashioned one. It had a hip roof over the four main rooms and a skillion roof over the two rear ones. I am struggling to remember if it was of brick or weatherboard construction. That style should have been weatherboard, but I distinctly remember it was more strongly constructed than the similar well-maintained house on the lower adjacent land. So, I will settle for brick construction, at least for the four main rooms. A verandah ran full width across the front. There was a single room separated from the house, at the rear. It could well have been added for a grandparent, or even for a farm labourer, if the small holding had been put to that productive use. Or, as I was to find, it could be used as the proverbial "dog-house" for out-of-favour husbands.

The land could possibly have been worked as a farm, because there was a very large shed-cum-garage, now very dilapidated, near the house. My long term plan was to renovate the house, rebuild or re-locate the shed, work the land as a hobby farm, and, eventually, subdivide the land. The frontage lent itself for provision of a suburban block alongside the existing house, or even there was a possibility of providing a battle-axe block behind the house, providing I re-located the shed-garage to provide access to the rear block. Although confining himself to a much less ambitious plan, Ivan had tackled a similar problem on a similar old-fashioned house. Working on a more dilapidated house, in comparison, on a small Castlemaine suburban block, he had made it presentable.

However, I didn't visualize Melva's reaction. Perhaps I should have done. The house was far from a young mother's dream home and she never became reconciled to the possibility that I could manage to change the design to something more appropriate. Melva's contribution to improvement of "Melrose", as the house was named by the previous owners, was to carpet the main bedroom with Feltex.

I set about trying to make the land pay for itself. I hired a rotary hoe contractor to turn the soil over on about a third of the land; I then planted potatoes as a means of further improving the soil. I read about a method of making compost as used in India. It involved making an enclosure with straw bales to provide heat for the raw material of the compost. There was plenty of vegetable matter covering the rest of the land to supply this material, not to mention the food scraps from the house. With this compost, I started to grow mushrooms in the large, decrepit shed. I produced a good first crop from which we had a few nice meals. Unfortunately, I had to put the project of mushroom growing on hold, due to other pressures.

• • •

At about the time of buying the house in Croydon, I had changed my job. I could see little future as a meter-tester. There was a vacancy advertised for a plan room attendant in the Electricity Supply Department, right in the heart of Melbourne's business district, opposite busy Flinders Street railway station. Although this could be regarded as a backward step – and was by my meter-testing colleagues – it was a staff position. It could be more particularly regarded as a backward step when compared with my first job of draftsman, which was a step above that of looking after the plans that draftsmen drew. The words, "staff position" more than compensated for these backward steps. It is a form of class distinction that I think still exists in Australia today. One does not have a staff 'job': one has a staff 'position'. Besides that snobbish outlook, there were, for me, material gains. For a start, there would be more pay (salary), more annual leave, super-annuation, easier transport by

rail virtually to the door, indoor work negating weather conditions, access of shopping and banking locations (no credit cards available in those days) and other minor 'perks'.

So, applied for the job and got it.

While waiting for the decision, an incident happened to strengthen my determination to escape from His Satanic Majesty (Meter and Tests chief **Harry S. Martin**). I had just learned of a situation that I considered, rightly or wrongly, made HSM an anti-Semitic racist – shades of Hitler. All S.E.C. employees who had served in the armed services during the war had been guaranteed re-employment, with reasonable promotion, once the war finished. This had happened to all of us at Meter and Tests, with one exception. He was a Jew. Despite his protests to HSM, he had not been given his due promotion. There was a certain amount of unrest within the State Electricity Commission, particularly in the Electricity Department, which, as I have said, had its head-quarters in Flinders Street, and covered such subsidiaries as Meter and Tests.

As a meter-tester, I had been a member of the Electric Trades Union ever since I had started at the Richmond laboratory. When I became a staff member by transferring to the drawing office at Flinders Street, I immediately joined the State Electricity Commission Officers Association. The S.E.C.O.A. was the staff members' white-collar union. As an E.T.U. member at Richmond, I had been politically minded, but not politically active, apart from a few arguments with Gus the Communist. However, within the first few weeks at Flinders Street, I attended a meeting of the S.E.C.O.A., called to deal with the general staff unrest.

At this meeting, in fear and trembling, I got to my feet to speak in public for the first time. (I was never much good as a public speaker). I drew the meeting's attention to the plight, at Meter and Tests, of the Jew, whose name I have regretfully forgotten. There was an almost immediate reaction. No more than a week later, I visited Meter and Tests to say a final farewell to my former colleagues. My Jewish friend rushed up to me, announcing he had received his promotion, with retrospective increase of pay. His gratitude knew no bounds. My instigation of the action had apparently filtered through to him.

chapter twenty three – elected union secretary

By raising the plight of my fellow worker, I must have attracted the attention of various influential S.E.C.O.A. members. In a matter of months, I was elected secretary of the Electricity Supply Branch of my new union.

I became responsible for the secretarial duties of more than a thousand branch members. The union, as a whole, probably had a membership of 4000.

Although the overall policy of the S.E.C.O.A. was 'middle of the road', there were left-wing and right-wing members. This led to secretarial tensions, resulting in my need to be very careful when approaching various members. For example, one of the superior officers in the drawing office was one of the most conservative of right-wingers. Rumour had it that he had bought the most miserable block of land to build his house on, just to give him an address in Toorak, the suburb of Melbourne. Because he could possibly exert influence to my detriment within the drawing office, I had to take extra care in talking to him. Not that it would have stopped me opposing his reactionary proposals.

My duties included keeping a register of all members. This involved keeping a card for each member, on which his/her financial status was recorded. In hindsight, I was virtually an assistant-treasurer, because I had to remind non-financial members to pay their fees.

Since coming to Melbourne after the war, I had gradually become more politically aware. As a teenager, I would probably have been seen as a conservative. The living conditions of people in the Richmond slums surrounding Meter and Tests, compared with the ultra-conservatism of Bob Menzies' government, caused an about-face to my political thinking. I had been appalled by Menzies' treatment of interjectors at an election meeting I attended in the Melbourne Town Hall. Regardless of the interjections, legitimate questions or otherwise, he made fools of those questioning his policies.

As mentioned earlier, my political thinking had been coloured by Alan Aldous's classes in short-story writing. They were very left-wing, and to a certain extent, I agreed with the ideology. I have always suspected that these attendances, coupled with my union secretarial duties, came under the notice of the Federal Government at the time. Consequently, I consider I was branded a left-wing 'pink', if not a 'red'. We were living in an age of political history when Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies capitalized on the world-wide hysteria of 'red-in-the-bed' to remain in power.

This comment may need some explanation. An American politician, Senator McCarthy, rose to prominence by proclaiming many of the intelligentsia were secret members of the Communist Party or, at least, were strong supporters of the Russian style of Communism. It must be remembered this was a time when the 'cold war' existed between America and Russia, the two most powerful nations to emerge from World War II. Anti-communist thinking and action were rife throughout the so-called democratic countries of the world. So, McCarthy had no trouble in hauling movie stars, authors, unionists, any of the clear-thinking intelligentsia before the American Senate to denounce them. He required them to prove they were not communists and were not secret enemies of the nation. The misguided senator's style of action is now derided as 'McCarthyism'.

Prime Minister Menzies was a leading protagonist of this intellectual and political warfare. He was wont to brand all little 'L' liberals, among them a high percentage of Labor Party members, as communists. Into the bargain, he was the founder of the capital 'L' Liberal Party. Real liberal thinking was not part of his forte. As a result of his philosophy – for want of a better word – all who opposed his politics were communists. Regardless of my lifelong refusal to join a political party, I was consequently seen as a 'red-in-the-bed' communist. I feel that, in certain quarters, that stigma has stayed with me the rest of my life (Later in life, when I became a journalist, I deliberately abstained from joining any political party, to avoid finger-pointing of political bias).

As a sidelight to the effect on my life, an experience far from the hotbed of politics threw some light on how everyday acquaintances reacted. On holiday at Harcourt, early in my term as union secretary, I was driving a car to the orchard of my brother-in-law Vincent (Vin) Wilson. As I stopped at the orchard gate, three contemporaries of Vin were squatting, talking, alongside the gate. They made no move to open the gate, as I would have done were the positions reversed. When I got out of the car, there was no word of greeting in answer to mine. I could feel the hostility in the air. So I just ignored them and proceeded on my way.



Keeping the S.E.C.O.A. records up to date required spending many hours outside my normal working hours. The association (union) also conducted a shop within the S.E.C. Flinders Street building. At this small shop, union members were able to purchase such items as cigarettes and sweets. It was also part of my duties to keep this shop fully stocked.

As Croydon was so far away from Central Melbourne, I stayed at the office when the day's work was finished to carry out my union duties. This left Melva, with a toddler, Barbara, and a baby, Judith, carrying the burden of home duties without much help from me. Tension built up between us. It was brought to a head when Melva, without mentioning Christmas holiday arrangements to me, invited her mother, brother Vin and his family to Christmas dinner.

At the same time, without mentioning it to Melva, I had wanted to have this first Christmas at 'Melrose', alone with our small family (When I first saw the house, I was impressed with the ornamental nameplate 'Melrose' which adorned the front verandah. I instinctively thought that I was meant to have it as my home. Why else would my two loves – MELva and ROSEs – be so combined in the housed of my choice?)

So, with the impetuosity of youth, I objected strongly to the continual presence of the Wilson family intervening in our almost non-existent family life. It must be borne in mind that I had been living with my in-laws for six or seven years, ever since the war. However, Melva wouldn't budge from her Wilson family Christmas dinner plan. I threatened to boycott the dinner if the Wilson clan descended upon us – stand-off. I spent Christmas Day alone, almost, fishing in the upper reaches of the Yarra River. As it happened, I met a young lad and fellow fisherman, who gleefully claimed my only catch of the day, an eel that had entangled my fishing line unmercifully.

Things went from bad to worse on the home front after that.

Travelling home by train late at night, after S.E.C.O.A. business, I got into conversation with a girl who shared my compartment. She had a huge, heavy suitcase with her. When she prepared to depart at a small, intermediate station, I offered to help her home with the suitcase. As it happened, a taxi came along to alleviate my struggle with the heavy burden. We both got in the taxi, which I intended using to return to the station after dropping her off at home. When we eventually reached that destination, the taxi had to stop some 100 metres or more, at the end of a rough bush track. The house was at the other end of the track, virtually in the back blocks of this outer suburban area. The taxi driver would not wait for me to deliver the girl and the suitcase to her doorstep, so I paid and dismissed him.

The lass turned out to be a nurse in a major Melbourne hospital, by the name of Queen Victoria Hospital, if memory serves me correctly. She was returning from holidays, which was the reason for the heavy suitcase. In the course of conversation, I had told her where I worked and the reason for my late night train journey. After being thanked with a kiss and a cuddle, I trudged back to the station. Here, the acquaintance would have ended, but Laurel (the nurse), wrote me a thank-you letter, addressing it to the S.E.C. Flinders Street office. I put this letter in my shirt pocket, only to find it pinned to my pillow a few nights later. Melva had found it whilst emptying my pockets, for washing.

After the Christmas Day fiasco, the tension between us really got out of hand. Melva was not in the mood to accept any explanation of the letter. We were bickering unpleasantly so I moved out of the house into the sleep-out at the back (the doghouse?). That was the start of the final breakup of my marriage.

And I did not ever see Laurel again.

The timing of movements by both Melva and me remains vague in my memory. However, Melva eventually moved back to the Wilson household at Harcourt. I was still using the sleepout as my home base. With the help of my second wife, Betty, and her relations, I tried to improve the house, 'Melrose', with a view to selling it. The main attempt at improvement was re-plastering the main bedroom, particularly the ceiling and its cornices.

Melva did move back to 'Melrose', but I was long gone. Through a Croydon real estate agent, I was able to sell the house, Melva having moved back to Harcourt yet again, permanently.

The break-up of my marriage cost me dearly, in finance and health. I was unable, ever, to obtain a war service loan again, actually, I never tried to renew such a loan. Having to pay board and, eventually, fund two homes proved to be a heavy burden. When I had finalized the house sale, I sought board and lodging in Croydon. I felt at home in the district.

I soon found a place. The landlady did my washing, cut and supplied a lunch each day. However, it proved too good to be true. The husband worked on the night cart, as many homes in Croydon were unsewered. However much he tried – he did try very hard – he could not rid himself of the smell associated with toilets. He brought the smell home with him when the shift ended each morning. After a month or so of putting up with the aroma, I shifted nearer my job, finding board with a widow at Essendon.

Up to this stage, I had kept news of the marriage break-up from Mum and Dad. In reply to my letter advising them of the situation, Dad came down from Harcourt. He brought cakes, scones and lots of loving care from Mum, along with instructions about keeping healthy. I couldn't have heeded the latter properly, because I had a nervous breakdown as the result of the tension I had been under, together with a complete change of lifestyle.



“Wahroonga”

Five views of the family home where we four siblings were born and bred.



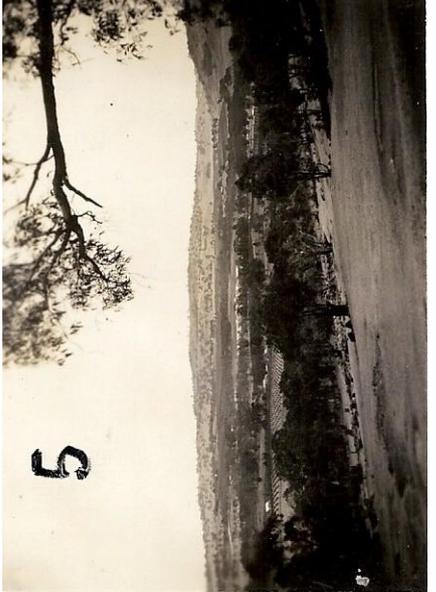
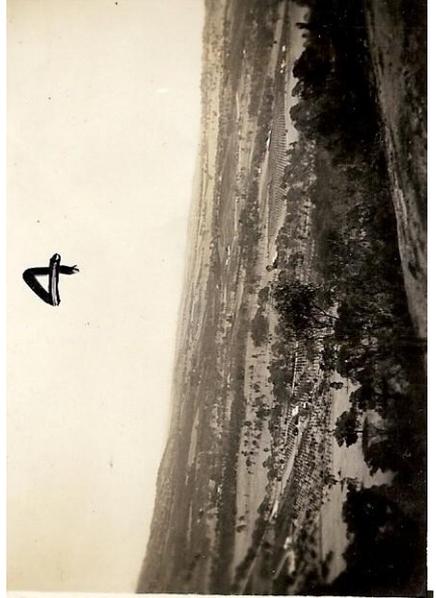
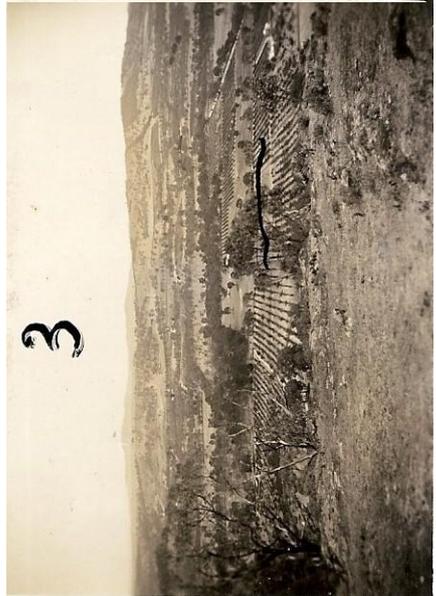
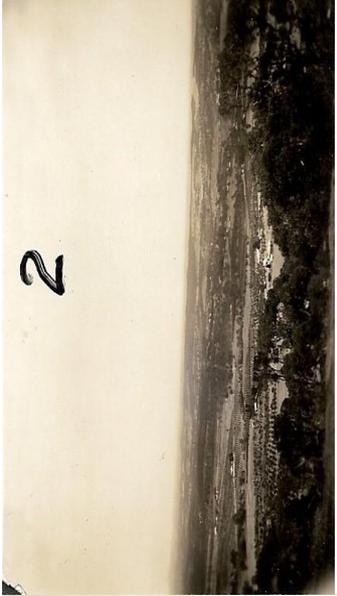
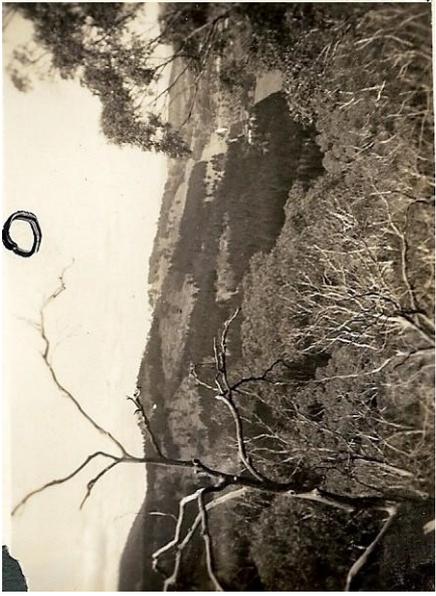
Top left: Talking of “bread” (rather than “bred”), in the early days there was a bread box on the gatepost- to the right of the utility in the picture- where the baker Mr (Colin?) Blume left fresh loaves on his round from Harcourt, some six kilometres away. By the time we kids walked (sauntered) down the 150 metre drive from the gate to the kitchen, there would be large holes plucked from the centre of the loaves, the temptation of tasting fresh bread proving too great to resist. Mum later made her own bread! Extending to the right all along the drive from Reservoir Rd to the house, existed the little young orchard of some eight to 10 acres. On close examination, the apple trees in the photo are in full bloom.

Top Right: Taken from the old original orchard, “Wahroonga” can be seen nestling in the protection of the cypress “hedge” on the southern side. I can remember when the cypresses were planted, showing the remarkable growth in the 15 or so years to when the photo was taken in the late 1930’s or early 1940’s. Dad is standing in the right foreground beside a group of boxes waiting to be filled. In a black and white photo, I have optimistically inscribed on the back “Colour of the apples can be faintly seen.” The trees on the immediate front left are fully laden, with Red Delicious or Jonathans, if memory serves me correctly.

Lower Left: My mother standing in the front of the southern side of the house. Note the tank stand in front of the kitchen chimney.

Lower Centre: The front of the house with full width veranda, taken from last rows of young orchard, apple tree in full bloom.

Lower Right: The northern side



Harcourt Valley Captions

These six photos were taken on Mount Alexander, the “HILLSIDE” of the Pellas clan, looking west to the “SUNNYSIDE”, on the far horizon, of the Leversha (my mother’s) clan.

I took the series from the vicinity of the Flagstaff, a cairn of granite rocks erected by the explorer Major Mitchell. The camera was an Agifold, a concertina- type folding camera. It came with a tripod, which I don’t remember using, but I must have done so, as the steadiness belies being hand-held. I would like to think the pictures were taken atop our popular Castle Rock, but it would have been too low on the mountainside.

So, the panorama starts with the southernmost point of Mt. Alexander in Frame 0, ranging through the virtually invisible village of Harcourt in Frame 2 to the reservoir with Mt Barker behind it and the northernmost point of Mt, Alexander on the extreme right of Frame 5.

Now for the detail, for which you would be equipped, preferably, with strong magnifying glass:

A: “HILLSIDE” – I am starting with Frame 4, because for the Pellas clan, this is where history starts. At the very left hand edge of this frame, about a third of the way up, can be seen where the drive takes a turn in front of Hillside homestead towards the dairy on the extreme edge of frame.

B: “WAHROONGA” – The home where I was born. The buildings are partially hidden by intervening trees, but the orchard can be seen to the right, extending up the hill to...

C: “UNDERA”- Uncle Herman’s home and adjoining orchard.

D: RESERVOIR- Where we spent many an enjoyable time in Grandpa Pellas’ sailing dinghy fishing when Grandpa could resist the urge to hoist the sail.

E: S.S.4043 HARCOURT NORTH STATE SCHOOL- Where we received our primary education. The school, with the reservoir, also became the community centre, with dances, card parties and general public gatherings. Sitting in school, looking due east, we could see the whitish scar on Mt. Alexander which was the granite quarry where Grandpa Pellas worked.

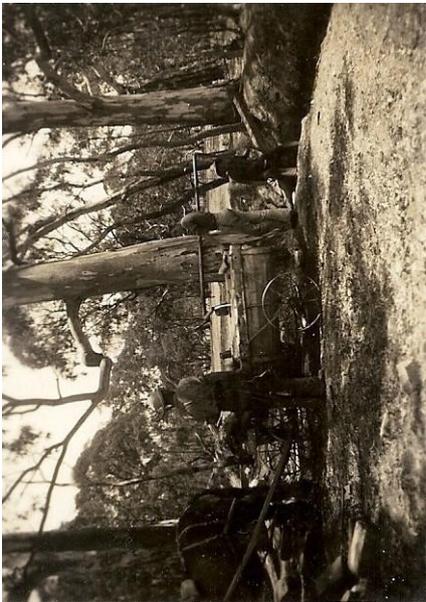
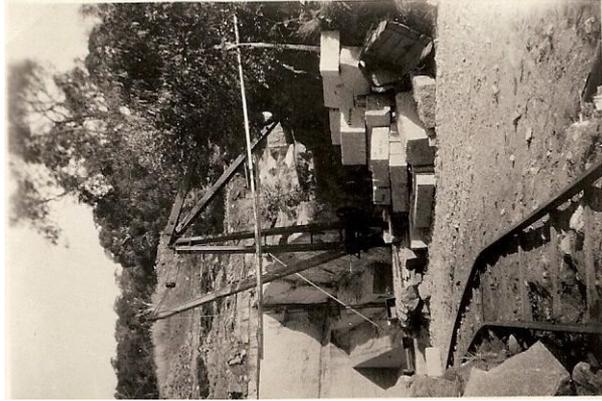
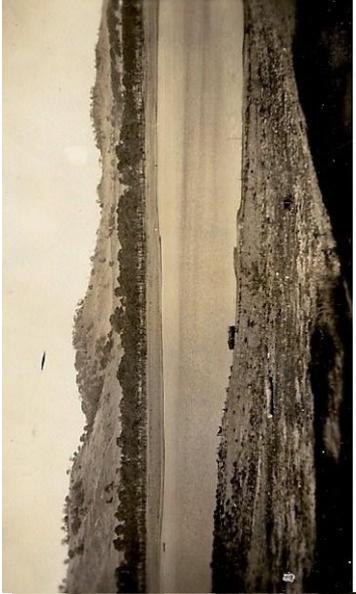
F: The northern tip of Mt. Alexander, where it merged with Mt. Barker, seen behind the reservoir.

H: Again hidden by gumtrees at the foot of the mountain is Aunty Olive’s home “Warrawing”. What can be seen is the long drive leading up to “Warrawing” through the adjoining orchards of “Hillside” and “Warrawing” from Reservoir Road, which all our properties faced.

G: “HIGHFIELD”- Where Ethel, the wife of my brother Ivan was born and bred. The home of her parents, Will and Fra Quirk, can just be seen above yet another intervening group of trees. (My apologies for getting the alphabetic pointers “H” and “G” the wrong way around)

I: Directly above the group of buildings in the foreground (whose ownership now escapes me), ranging across the middle distance lies the village of Harcourt. While most buildings are beyond the scope of even a powerful magnifying glass, the schools proximity can be seen as one of the first visible (at least to my mind). Dad used to walk the three miles from “Hillside” to attend school, well before S.S.4043 Harcourt North School was even dreamed of.

J: One of the pine plantations on Mt. Alexander, at almost the southern point of the mountain. The main plantation, at least in our eyes, was virtually behind “Wahroonga”, where Ivan, Trev Quirk and I spent many a pleasant day rabbiting or just plain roaming.



Harcourt Reservoir

Opposite Page Panorama

Harcour Reservoir, to us local residents, should really be called Harcourt North Reservoir, as our Harcourt North SS4043 State School is located adjacently. Come-what-may, the story goes that the "Res", as it was popularly known, was designed to supply water to the mining town of Maldon, some 20 to 30 kilometres distant. Later surveying discovered Maldon was too high for the water, in planned open-cut channels, to reach there. So, the village of Harcourt, some six or seven kilometres away, was the main beneficiary.

In this, my second (and last) attempt at panoramic photography, the Res is shown in the grip of the 1938-39 drought. The water level was as low, if not lower than the previous record in the 1914 drought (of which, naturally, I have no memory!!)

The relative effect of the drought can possibly be gauged by the comparison of sizes between the valve tower, Grandpa's 15 feet (5 metres) dinghy on the north shore to the left and the diminutive figure of an angler on the water line to the right and opposite tower. Behind the angler, the earthen bank rises to a height where a bystander on top of it was on eyelevel with the top of the tower. I well know the height of the bank because I dared to emulate my cousin Geoff's roll down the grassy landward side of some 30 to 40 metres, landing at the bottom battered, bruised and bloody.

Grandpa's boat was usually moored at the far end of the bank near the top right corner of the water line. The school was a further 200 metres in line with the bank, beyond the first line of trees. With a strong magnifying glass, Blight's granite quarry can be seen as a white patch on the crease-line in the battered photograph.

The Res was formed by damming Barker's Creek, which entered on the extreme left of the first frame. The eastern end of Mount Barker can be seen in the first two frames, as distant from the start of Mount Alexander in the far right of the third frame. Mt Barker continues beyond the left of the panorama.

The pictures were taken from the high- water level. For example, I have stood fishing before and since on a rock at the foot of the tree on the near left of the first frame.

Carting Water- 1939 Drought

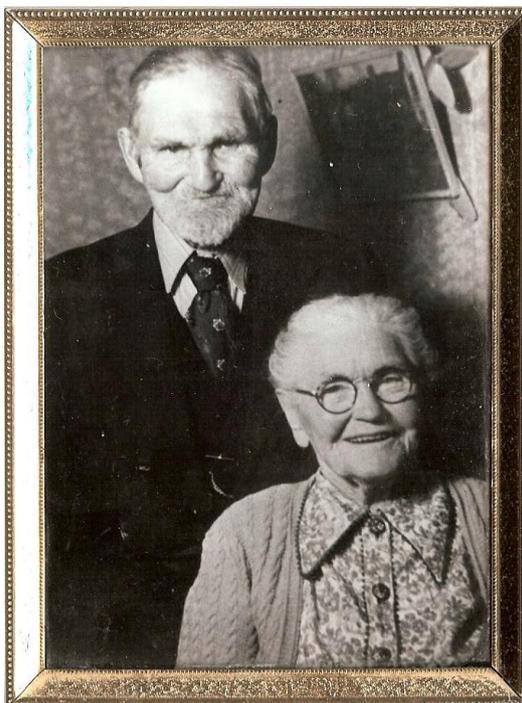
Opposite Lower left

While the timber background and tree shade does little to clarify the detail, this is a photo taken on New Years Day, 1939. It shows a combined effort to obtain water, during the drought of that year, from a water race that cut through the corner of our back paddock. Dad had harnessed the horse to an old spray pump body. Ivan is straddling a pole across the race, using a pump which would usually be located in a petrol barrel. I am steadying the pipe leading from this hand operated pump, while Dad is steadying the horse. At first glance, I thought I had taken the photo, but I am definitely in the photo, so it must have been taken by someone else, possibly my sister Betty, or my mother.

Granite Quarry

Opposite Lower Right:

A small- very small- corner of Blight's granite quarry, showing squared off blocks piled in front of a crane. In his early Harcourt years, Grandpa Pellas was employed at the quarry, largely because of his skill in splicing the steel ropes used in the cranes. Harcourt granite was used in building Sydney's Cockatoo Dock. As thin polished veneer slabs, it was also used in facing of the State Savings Bank in Melbourne. Ivan has cause to remember the quarry because his fingers were caught between the cogs of a discarded winch on the hilltop above the quarry while he, Jack Jennings and I were playing with it. As mentioned in the reservoir caption, the quarry is on the far horizon of the panorama.



Forbears

Top Left: My Great-Grandmother, Eva Lisa Pellas. She has the appearance of a care-worn mother of nine, scattered far and wide, from Finland and Sweden, to Australia and America. Unfortunately, I could not find a photo of my Pellas Great-Grandfather, Herman Johansson Pellas.

Top Right: My Leversha Great-Grandparents, Henry and his wife Susannah, nee Bindon. Henry was a bit of a rascal in his early days on the Victorian gold fields. From all reports, he ran a sort of speak-easy and was continually hard pressed to hide bottles of rum from the police.

Centre Left: Grandpa Leversha. Taken, I think, at their home in Harcourt. As a young man, he walked three miles (five km) from the family property at Woodbrook to work in the slate quarries at Barkers Creek. Often, he would use the small pick he usually carried to dig out rabbits for their dinner.

Centre Right: My grandmother Maria sitting in front of the steps leading to the back veranda of their Harcourt home. Standing is one of her sons, who I think is my Uncle Herb, but it could well be Uncle Rob, who visited his parents almost every Sunday. I well remember the lollies he handed out when our Sunday visits coincided.

Bottom Left: Grandpa (Johan Hermanson) and Grandma (nee Eliza Jane Trevean) Pellas, as they were around the years 1948 to 1950. Grandpa spent his first night in Harcourt under a bridge on the road to Bendigo, where he was apparently aiming to make his fortune in the goldfields. He was found under that bridge by a local land owner Philip Trevean, who was looking for someone to help him farm his land. Johan (known from that moment as John) eventually married the boss's daughter. Together they founded a Pellas dynasty of nine children, 19 grand-children, 63 great-grand-children, 92 and counting great-great-grand children, and several great-great-great-grandchildren, increasing with every year. The photo was taken by one of their grand-children, Frances Gwendoline (Gwenda) Pomeroy, who could not remember the exact year. Grandpa died in 1951, so it was more likely 1948 than 1950 when the photo was taken.

Bottom Right: Grandpa and Grandma Pellas, taken presumably on their wedding day, Gwenda also reproduced this photo from a larger framed version in her Olinda home garden. She thought Grandpa looked like the film star Omar Sharif. I think Grandpa looks like my late cousin Elvie Pellas, Uncle Herman's daughter.

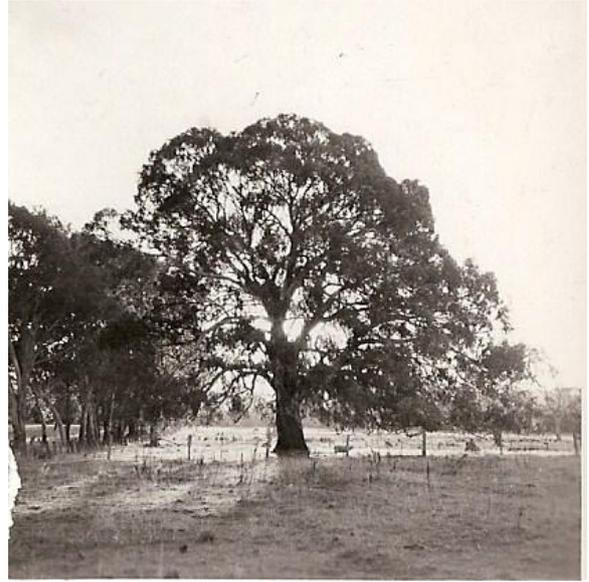
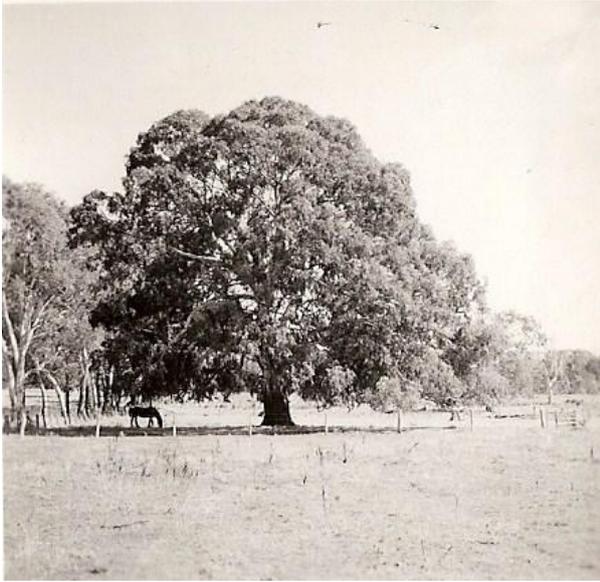


Apple Packing

Apple Packing classes were held regularly at McMahon's apple shed about one kilometre from our school, Harcourt North State School, SS4043.

Upper Photo: This was probably taken the year I shared first prize with Joyce Ford for an individual entry in Melbourne's Royal Agricultural Show. I am kneeling on the right and Joyce is sitting on the left, holding a framed certificate. Our school also won first prize in the team entry, with the ribbon award stretched, in the photo, between Ken Jones and myself. The apple packing visiting teacher, Mr Harris, is seated in the centre, with head-mistress Miss Kent standing on the right and Miss Barrett standing on the left. Incidentally, my first girl friend (although she didn't know it, but probably sensed it), Gwen Jones, is seated next to Mr Harris, just above my right shoulder.

Lower Photo: A year or two, maybe three, later the school repeated the team effort. It was now the turn of my brother, Ivan, seated on the left, and sister Shirley, standing in the centre of the back row. If memory serves me well, I think Shirley also won the individual prize that year.



Umbrella Tree

Top Left: The umbrella tree. Our much beloved umbrella (gum) tree became a playground for us four children, a shelter during storms for horse and cattle, and a parking place at times for Dad's dray and lorry. The massive size of it may be gauged in the left photo by the horse grazing beneath the outer left limbs. The tree was about 120 metres due west of our home "Wahroonga".

Top Right: After rain on a late afternoon, with the sun setting behind, it was a glorious sight from the kitchen window. With a breeze shimmering the glistening leaves, it turned into the largest Christmas tree in our world. The centre photo shows my attempt to capture the effect on just such an occasion. Alas, although the two photos were taken within days, the setting sun's rays seen in the foreground, turned the tree into a skeleton-like appearance.

Right: The photo on the right shows my sister Betty using a lower limb of the umbrella tree as a swing.





Eventide at Wahroonga

A typical war-time night scene in the kitchen-cum-living room at "Wahroonga". Dad is sitting in his chair by the fireside after a days work in the orchard, as his father was regularly seen to sit at "Hillside". Possibly, the difference would have been that Dad's day of work could have been at his part-time war job as toolstore keeper at Thompson's Foundry in Castlemaine. Mum would have been writing either to Shirley, my sister who was serving in the Women's Royal Australian Airforce (WRAAF) in Townsville or Ivan, my brother, who was flying Halifax bombers over Germany with the RAAF.

Dad is sitting with a newspaper in his lap and his pipe in his hand. The kettle is being boiled for supper on the stovetop above the open firebox with flames engulfing the firewood. I took the photos with only available light, standing on a chair, on leave from the army.

Inset: the original photograph size before enlargement.



Above Left: Obviously taken with a background of lustrous foliage typical of my mother's green fingered garden at her "Wee Hoose" home in Bull Street Castlemaine, this photo shows us four siblings together at Christmas time, 1977. From left is Ivan (at age 54), Shirl (Shirley Noreen Allen, 56) myself (58) and Betty (Elizabeth Joy Vanstan, 50) This was probably the last of very few photos showing us together. Mums note on back of photos says: "To Tas, My family, with fond memories of a very happy day. Mum."



Above Right: Having our first glimpse of the sea on an obviously unfriendly day at Balnarring on Western Port Bay, Victoria. From left: Ivan, Betty (in Shirley's arms), Shirley and me. This was our first holiday, camped in tents on a site recommended by Harry Ford, a fellow orchardist friend of Dad.



Centre Right: Braving the beach, from left: Shirley, Mavis Ford (Uncle Rob's daughter by adoption, and baby Betty's holiday minder: no relation to Harry), myself and Ivan. When the tide there was ebbing, you could walk out hundreds of yards. We thought we could walk to Phillip Island, ten kilometres to the east!



Bottom Right: All dressed up, ready for an outing, possible Sunday School. From left: Shirley, Betty (clutching her doll), myself and Ivan. The tree at left background was in Douglas's paddock next door. A year or so later than the photo, I climbed it to attach a radio aerial that stretched across the drive, across the cypress hedge, across the garden to the dining room chimney some ten metres or so to the left of the photo. Note the low height of the cypress hedge in comparison to later photos of "Wahroonga".



Dads Photos

Top Left: Dad was a difficult man to photograph. His aversion to the camera was not helped when a travelling photographer talked Mum into this framed enlargement during the depression. However, we kids treasured it, as does Wendy now.

Top Right: Dad was a very different man in his natural environment, the apple orchard. Note the long wooden forked sticks propping up heavily laden limbs to prevent breaking.



Centre Right: Three generations enjoying a Sunday get-together. Grandpa Pellas on the left, Dad on the right, with me in the centre. Note the similar like-father, like-son positioning of arms and hands.

Right: Dad and me at the wood heap. It must have been a celebration, with Dad wearing an unaccustomed tie, and equally so, a leery (beery?) grin around his cigarette. The saw, too, is in the wrong hand.





Three in Uniforms

Above Left: Yours Truly. Served in and near Darwin during most of air raids, dubbed on of “Curtain’s Tourists”, as toured most of Australia, never leaving the mainland.

Above right: My brother Ivan proudly wearing his “wings”. Based in England, he went on to being a pilot officer flying Halifax bombers over Germany, earning the DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross) and Bar.

Right: My sister Shirley, who served in Queensland in radio contact with Air Force planes on missions over the Pacific area. Before joining the W.A.A.F (Women’s Air Force), she improved her Morse Code sending/ receiving by experience in Harcourt Railway Station, being tutored by the station master.





Above: My Sister Betty (Elizabeth Joy) and her husband Doug Vanstan.

Left: My daughter Wendy and her husband Mike Allan on their wedding day.

Below: My brother Ivan and his wife Ethel, also on their wedding day.



Left: My daughter Judith signing the marriage register and her second husband Stephen Hando.

Below: My daughter Barbara and her husband Ted Franklin.

Below Left: Myself and my wife Betty taken on the occasion of our daughter Wendy's wedding.





Above Left: My first-born daughter Barbara, with her husband Ted Franklin, son Brent and daughter Krista, taken in the garden of their home in Montrose, a distant suburb of Melbourne nestling in the foothills of the Dandenong Range. This was the first time I had met the children, having been re-united with Barbara shortly before after an estrangement of almost 30 years. Although blind, Brent at this stage delivered newspapers on his bicycle, guided by his sister Krista, on her bicycle. Examples of Brent's dare-devil exploits are shown on other pages. Krista, after going through a marriage break-up, as her grandfather "Gramps" and grandmother "Nan" did, rose to great heights in the banking world. She is currently based with Bendigo Bank in Western Australia, flying frequently to Adelaide in South Australia for conferences.

Above Right: The future grand-parents, "Gramps" and "Nan" of the two children pictured left. Yours truly, in army uniform, and my first wife, Melva Lillian (nee Wilson) are pictured on a cold wedding day, October 4, 1942, ready to leave on our honeymoon. Sadly our temperaments gradually became incompatible, intensified by post war housing shortage problems to the point where our marriage broke-up. My purchase of a run-down old-fashioned cottage on two acres at Croydon, a distant Melbourne suburb, did little to improve the situation. The home, named "Melrose", was soon lost, along with most mementos of that time, leaving the above photo the only survivor. It does little to flatter either of us.



Left: Intrepid grandson Brent never let blindness stop him any adventure. Here he is rock-climbing at Mt. Arapiles, Western Australia in October, 1989. He played blind cricket, rising to presidency of the Victorian association.

Right: Carrying out his regular voluntary shift as community radio announcer at 3 C.C. Central Victoria, when a teenager. He was soon to be- and still is- employed by a Melbourne based super-market chain as an officer controlling branch stock by telephone.



WANGARATTA Chronicle

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Wangaratta Chronicle was the first of several newspapers I worked for. In those days, more than 50 years ago, it was a broadsheet, black and white only, owned by the Elliot Group. Nowadays, in 2009, it is a tabloid, printed in full colour, by North Eastern Newspapers, the "North Eastern" applying to Victoria only. It is still a tri-weekly, as it was in my days during the early 1950's. For Monday's edition, I was the sole occupant of the whole building- editorial, management and printing works, busy on the phone checking all the weekend sporting results. Cricket results, especially, were tabulated, showing each individual score, how dismissed, complete with each bowler's statistics. From memory, it would have been 1951-52 when I was there. In mid-April, 2009, some 57 years after I left, my daughter, Wendy, and grand-daughter, Rebecca, passed through Wangaratta on their way to a wedding. They picked up a copy of the vastly different paper and brought it home to me.



Top left: "Bluebird": This pink house with the pink brick wall of a fence, at 17 Hampden Rd, Armadale (a Melbourne suburb) was the home in which my wife Betty grew up. In Bet's words "it didn't have that silly front porch then". Bet is seen at the gate and out "Bluebird" Ford is parked in front, easily recognised as a "yellow tail" as Victorians dub our number plated vehicles.

Top right: "Biddy": Also parked outside a children home (mine, "Wahroonga") is a diminutive, by comparison with the cypress "hedge", Anniversary Buick utility. Bet, characteristically called it a "Biddy Buick". Originally a majestic Yank Tank tourer, Dad had it converted to a utility. This was the vehicle Bet and I fled away from Wangaratta to Sydney in 1953. The journey always reminded Bet of the Howard Spring Novel "These Lovers Fled Away". Searching among hundreds of photos for the first of our motor vehicles, I found an accompanying note: "Tas, I have turned off "Biddy's petrol". The Buick was prone to leak at the carburettor after a long drive, although it never once failed to start when the foot stabbed the starter "button" on the floorboard.

Centre left: "Sam": The white Ford XW station Wagon I bought about the same time as I started the "Western Press". It is parked outside the home office of "W.P" in Horsley Drive, Smithfield, I used it to deliver our paper to the newsboy deliverers. Later, after the paper "hit the dust", each Wednesday I would take the two front doors off and deliver "The Liverpool Champion" of which I had become editor. With one my previous newsboys throwing out the passenger side, I would throw my share across the road to houses opposite.

Centre right: "Big Red": "Sam's" predecessor, towing the Millard caravan in an unknown location, probably on the way to visit my sister, Betty Vanstan, and family at Balliang East in Victoria. This caravan became the first marital home of my daughter Wendy, shown here as a young girl, approximately ten years old, with her mother. Wendy and Mike lived in it on our Horsley Park property while their home was being built in Kingswood.

Bottom left: The Plymouth: I cannot remember Bet's name for this sturdy Yank tank, which lived with us at Emu Plains for a short time while I was editor of the Nepean Times. It succeeded the back-to-front Studebaker (also no known nickname and, alas, no photo). "Back-to-front" because the rear boot was shaped like the front engine bonnet area. Bet was not amused when our Warragamba home dining table was commandeered as an engine mount bench for a few weeks while valve-grinding, etc, took place.

Bottom right: "Ice-cream Van": Anything less likely to be an ice-cream van, particularly in this setting, defies imagination. But this Chevrolet utility was just that in our very early NSW days. I would set out from out Narrabeen mini-flat, collect the ice-cream and proceed to designated streets. After ringing a huge hand bell for a few minutes at each stop, I would climb into the back and dish out ice-creams. This photo was taken at Colo River, during a week ling camping holiday.



Top: "Toby": Bet's last favourite car. After my stroke in '89 and subsequent shift from Horsley Park to the Kingswood unit found for us by Mike and Wendy, Bet found it awkward to drive the Bluebird Ford into the garage from the narrow side drive. So Mike bought and presented to us this three-cylinder Daewoo Matiz. It is pictured with Bet beside it and Grandson Ricky doing a Tarzan act at the tree in front of his family's home in Gungurru st, Kingswood.

Centre left: "Charlie": Bet's first favourite car, Charlie Volkswagen, with Bet and Wendy draped on the bonnet, pictured at our Horsley Park home. Both of them loved that car.

Centre right: 10 hp Ford Coupe: My first car. At heart, I have been a Ford man ever since. The signposts point to several towns near Leongatha, in Victoria's Gippsland area, where I spent a holiday with my friend Bill Taylor on his relatives farming property.

Bottom left: Sam's mate: Another Ford XW I owned at the same time as "Sam's" latter years, both virtually interchangeable and equally indestructible. The best model Ford ever built. Devotees are paying \$40,000 to \$50,000 for an XW sedan 35 years or more after they left the factory. The picture, the only full length one available, shows the ute, loaded with items from Mum's "Wee house" being cleared out on March 30, 1980, so the house could be sold. Mum dies in a Ballarat nursing home exactly a month later. I must have bought the ute on "Charlie's" demise, so Bet could use "Sam"- though she never liked the changed circumstances.

Bottom right: Sam's mate front view: The only photo I could find showing the front of the grey XW ute. I think this was taken at Burragorang Lookout, overlooking the backwaters of Warragamba Dam. Mum probably took the photo on her last visit to NSW. If I remember rightly, we had a picnic lunch on the bench table shown in the photo.



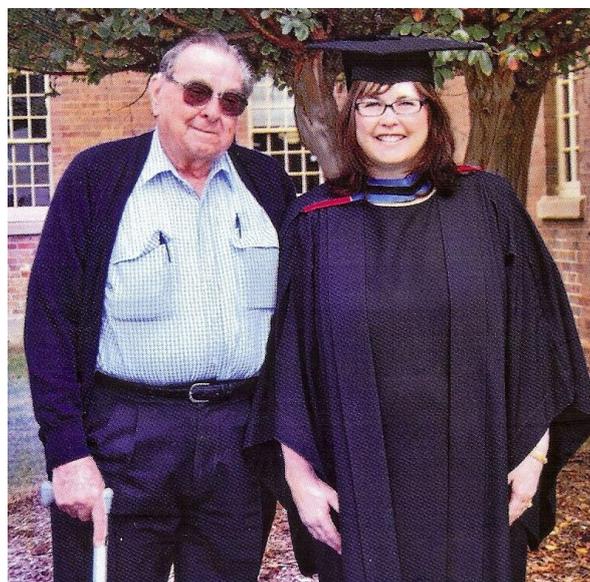
Top left: My mother, Ethel Beatrice Pellas (nee Leversha), who, I believe, had the greater influence in my upbringing. We had a mutual love of words- of reading words, of writing words, of understanding words- and, in later life, of gardening. My father's influence concentrated on physical toughness, joining Boy Scouts, joining his cricket team; he was not as successful as my mother.

Top right: My dear wife Betty (nee Florence Betty Pearce) who defused my dull electrical world to provide the spark that set alight my newspaper universe. From the earliest days of our 48 year relationship, Betty had faith in my desire to become a journalist. She even instigated corresponding in Pitman Shorthand, which I was trying very hard to learn but never really conquered. With her continual loyal support we weathered many hardships and setbacks to the stage where I owned my own newspaper.

Bottom left: My first born daughter Barbara Lilian Franklin (nee Pellas). Her influence, I believe, is far from her understanding, much more than could be expected because of the gap of 40 years in our lives. After those years since my first marriage broke up, receiving a letter at my office, marked impressively "CONFIDENTIAL", lifted a heavy weight off my shoulders. We had been together in spirit ever since the reunion meeting that letter inspired.

Bottom right: My daughter Wendy Elizabeth as a prefect (the badge hardly discernible, half out of the photo) at Fairfield Girls High School. I would have like her to go onto university, but it was not yet to be, until...

Below right- this page: Wendy and I pose for a photo taken by her daughter Emily just prior to Wendy graduating as Bachelor of Arts on April 20, 2009. The ceremony at University of Western Sydney, Parramatta Campus, culminated six years of hard slog as a part time mature aged student. Her studies at the Kingswood Campus were combined with her part time employment as a librarian at the same site, family duties for her husband and three children and her long time active involvement with church duties at Penrith Uniting Church. Those studies too, brought us- Wendy and me- closer together since the early days when she was a real Daddy's girl. I was able to help her with whatever editorial skill I retained in my declining years as applied to her assignments. My dear late wide would have been as proud of her as I am today. Wendy majored in English text and Writing. Perusing her assignments, I regularly discovered words I never knew existed. Eventually, I had to acknowledge that, as a writer, my daughter had moved far ahead of her father. In other words, I was lost for words.



WESTERN PRESSES

Circulating in Smithfield, Fairfield Heights, Fairfield West, Greystanes, Merrylands West, Guildford West, Smithfield West, Wetherill Park, Bossley Park and Horsley Park

Registered as a Newspaper under the Newspaper Act, 1898.
Printed for the Publisher and Proprietor, T. Pellas, by Bushell Press Pty. Ltd., Auburn.

Phone 604-1677 (all hours)
or, if unanswered 648-2531 (Printing Office)

P.O. Box 21, Smithfield, 2164.
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Vol. 2. No. 9

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Western Press: My two year venture into newspaper ownership. After 10 years with Cumberland Newspapers, I was moonlighting editorially for a former Fairfield Advance colleague, Bob Reupauch, who had started a newspaper, the St Marys Star. Cumberland did not like that a bit and threatened to sack me. I refused to stop aiding and abetting Bob's opposition unless they gave me a higher journalistic grading. Knowing a sacking would give me more funds than resignation, I succumbed to their threat. The Western Press was born two weeks later. After I had chosen the name "Western Press", I had a fight on my hands with the owners of Dubbo "Western Press". I won, but I was always thereafter in the wrong foot with the "establishment", particularly Rupert Murdoch's News Limited, owner of Cumberland Newspapers. You will notice that the pictured edition is Vol.2, No9. I never did get to Vol.4. Perhaps, being wise after the event, I should have had a less ambitious title, like the "Hills News" that operated on the other, northern, side of Parramatta. With a circulation including localities of Horsley Park, Edensor Park, Bossley Park, Wetherill Park, I could have called the paper "Park News".



Above: One of my favourite photos, showing Wendy and Michael with their family: Emily (on left), Ricky and Bec (Rebecca, on right). This framed picture hangs on my unit wall, just below the railways-style clock. I see it every time I check on the time. Imagine how many times that adds up to, as Emily nears the end of her high school years, Ricky is at University and Bec is a working girl, virtually “publisher” of these memoirs.

Right: The mother pictures with her children above as a young child herself on the knees of Santa Claus, ie. Yours truly. Penrith Rotary Club sponsored the kindergarten Wendy attended. As a Rotarian, I represented to club on the kindergarten committee, holding the office of president. So far as I know, Wendy was unaware she was sitting on her father’s Santa Claus knees.



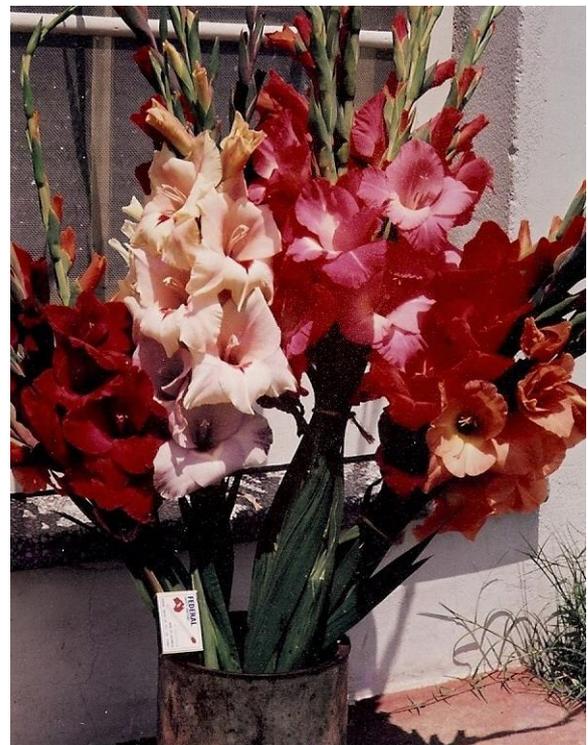
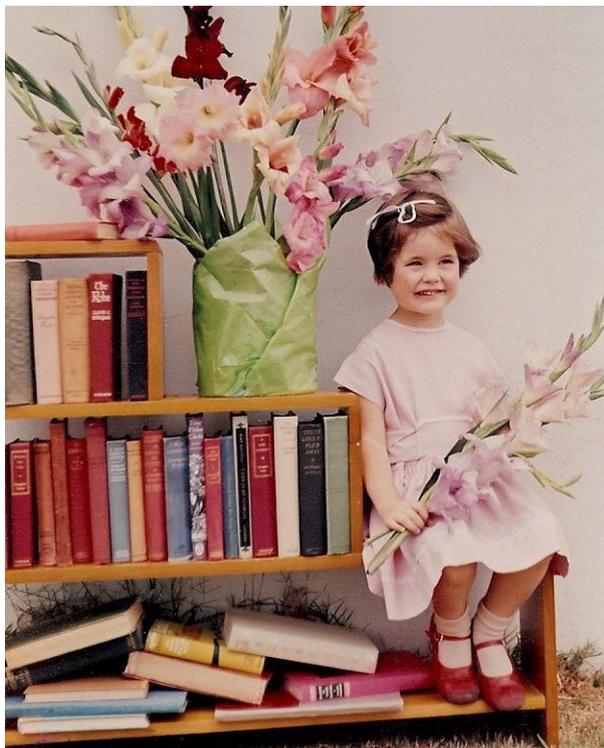


Above: Wendy in the gladioli garden at our home in Emu Plains, with Blue Mountains foot hills in the background. The flowers thrived on the cow manure produced by the dairy farm on which our home was built; the owner, Mr Pat Wines, allowing me free usage.

Lower left: Wendy sitting on a bookcase which, for the purpose of the photo, I had moved outside.

Lower right: A bunch of gladioli, ready to be transported to the St Marys florist shop. The owner, whose name escapes me now, lived in Emu Plains. She took as many flowers as I could provide. I would probably have been waiting on the short-lived St Marys Times started by Cumberland Newspapers when the Penrith Times, folded, operating from the Penrith Press office. I would arise about 5am, cut the day's supply of flowers and deliver them before turning my hands to editorial work.

Note: The matchbox (I smoked in those days) sitting on the container, below the bunch of gladioli, deliberately placed to compare with the size of flowers.



Right: This worm farm story appeared in the Fairfield Advance of February 16, 1988. After I left the Advance in the early 1970's to become Fairfield City Council's first Public Relations officer, I kept in touch with the paper's editorial staff up to my retirement and years later. As a result of this contact, a journalist and photographer visited our three-acre Horsley Park property. The photographer, Dave Hodges, was on of the same colleagues who appeared every Wednesday at my Advance editorial desk some 17 years earlier for their weekly assignments. He took the story photo and the one below, of me feeding and watering the worms in their polystyrene boxes.

Below: This photo shows me giving the worms their daily feed and sprinkle of water. My wife Betty was a stalwart back-up in this routine, especially when I was hard-pressed harvesting to fill orders.



Worm farmer Tas Pellas with some of his latest crop.

Horsley Park worm farmer whips up tasty bait

BAIT shortages in popular fishing spots around NSW have induced a retired journalist to swap words for worms in his production line.

Former Advance editor Mr Tas Pellas has expanded his original 1000-worm purchase into an estimated 500,000 within three years.

Now he has little time to go fishing but plenty of bait when he does take time out from his Horsley Park worm farm.

On retirement from his last full-time position as Fairfield Council's first public relations officer, Mr Pellas hoped to spend more time on the sport of his youth, fishing.

"Apart from local rivers, I travelled north of Armidale, west of Bathurst, south of Goulburn, down to northern and central Victoria," he said.

"Wherever I went, there was one problem - shortage of bait. 'So I thought I'd do something about it.'"

All of the first thousand worms purchased died, mostly through his lack of

Fish can't resist it

experience, but also due to poor quality of stock.

Later, returning from a fishing trip to Wee Jasper on Burrinjuck Dam, he stopped at Wonderworm Farm at Welby, near Mittagong.

"Another thousand and I was in business. Never looked back," he said.

The only books available at the time on vermiculture (or worm farming) were written in America and they claimed that 1000 worms would produce one million in one year. Australia's CSIRO recently re-published a booklet which suggested that 1000 worms would yield 375,000 worms in a year, which Mr Pellas

suggests is nearer the mark.

Worm beds are usually made of animal manure, but lawn clippings, peat moss, straw and shredded paper can also be used.

Food for worms can include kitchen scraps, any dead organic matter which contains nitrogen, animal manure and animal foods such as bran and mash.

"From a gardener's point of view, worm farming has two main benefits to offer," Mr Pellas said.

"By adding worms to the garden, providing there is sufficient organic matter, aeration of the soil is improved".

In addition, worms added to compost after the heat has gone out of it will break down the materials in half the normal time. Vermicompost - known colloquially as 'worm poo' - is an excellent fertiliser.

SAVE AT HARVEY NORMAN DISCOUNTS P



Above left: Studying Fairfield City Council building plans with a colleague (right), for which as council's public relations officer, I was responsible to publicise.

Above right: Prime Minister Gough Whitlam receiving my daughter Wendy as a debutante at eh Mayoral Ball, organised by yours truly, ably assisted by the Mayor's secretary. The Mayor, Janice Crosio, seen below right in frivolous mood with who else, eventually served in the three branches of government, local, state and Federal. In more serious mode, months later, we made a threesome at afternoon tea with Gough Whitlam discussing plans to avoid the P.M's dismissal a week or so later. Unfortunately, obviously, without success.

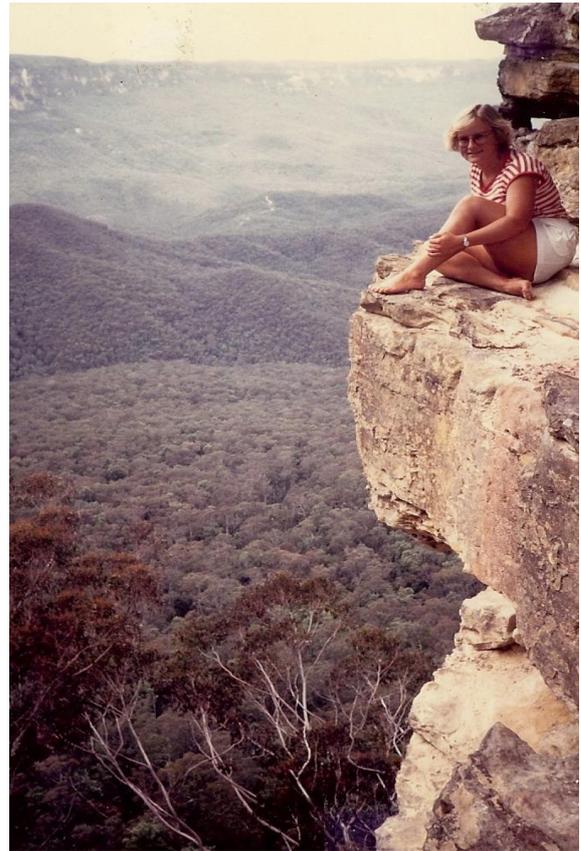
Below left: Three successive Fairfield City Council public relations officers: Myself (the original), Lloyd Crothers (second), and John Clark, the current office holder when the photo was taken at a council reunion.



International Visitors

Right: Maria Almgren, a descendant of Grandpa Pellas's brother Herman, visited us from Sweden, staying with us at Horsley Park for two to three weeks. A keen, good photographer with a fine pictorial eye, she could not resist the temptation to climb onto this Blue Mountains cliff face, despite the sign forbidding this dangerous act, and my strong protests. Handing me her valuable camera, she gave me strict instructions for framing the photo exactly as she required.

Lower left: Sylvia Hermanson, daughter of Grandpa Pellas's 20 year younger brother Aksel. Sylvia first visited her Sydney based Pella relations through finding my name in the Sydney telephone directory. This photo was taken on her second visit, when she was staying with my cousin Gwenda Pomeroy, daughter of Dad's centurion sister Ethel (Etty). Sylvia also celebrated her 100th birthday on December 15, 2004 her party being attended by my brother Ivan in California.



Lower right: Monica Karlsson, grand-daughter of Otto, Grandpa's 11 year younger brother, pictured with me on her first visit before the turn of the century. On her latest visit, in March 2009, Monica, her husband Evan, daughter Pernilla, with her husband Christian and their two children, were housed for a few days by my daughter Wendy and her husband Mike. Pernilla, a journalist, was able to submit weekly contributions to her publication in Sweden courtesy of broadband provided by Mike, my son-in-law. Mike also provided a spare car whereby they were able to tour the east coast down to Lorne in Victoria

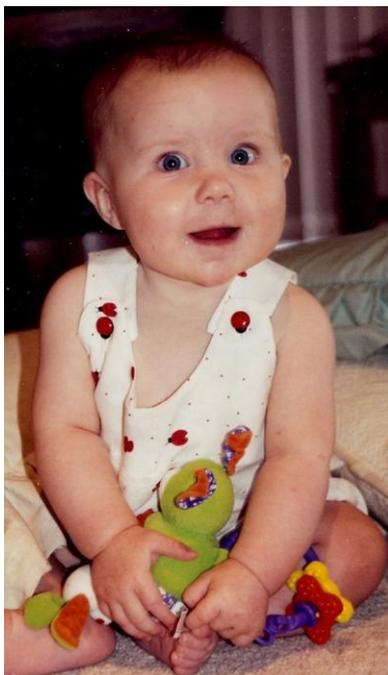




Above left: Bare of garden, my mothers “Wee Hoose” as she called it, when She and Dad retired to Castlemaine from “Wahroonga” at Harcourt.

Centre left: Typical of the shubbery and garden plants that surrounded the “Wee Hoose” within a few years, all the result of Mum’s green thumb.

Above: Grandma and grand-daughter, Mum and three months young Wendy.



Lower left: the last two photo feature as depicted by my first great grand-child, Ella Louise. Here she is shown at seven months.

Lower right: 12 months later, Ella is seen gambolling on and off the red carpet at her grand-mother’s second marriage. Judith, my daughter, and her new hubby Stephen declared Ella was the star of the celebration- the life of the party.



chapter twenty four – no home...no job

Eventually, I had to resign from the State Electricity Commission and, consequently, the position of S.E.C. Officers' Association branch secretary. I went to live with Len Black and his wife, Betty, who was soon to become my second wife, an explanation of this turn around comes later in this chapter.

When my immediate boss retired, I had stepped up from being plan room assistant officer to being plan room officer. I had encouraged Len to apply for the position of being my assistant. We had lived within a kilometre of each other when I came to Melbourne after the war. As near neighbours, we had travelled together by train each day to and from Meter and Tests. Strangely, Melva had never entered into the friendship, although I had visited Len and Betty in their temporary living quarters – virtually a hut in the backyard of Betty's brother's home. At the time of my breakdown, they had progressed from the Gardenvale hut to their very own new home at Hampton.

I was at a complete loss after leaving the S.E.C. To help myself snap out of it, I built a garage at the Hampton home. I still had Dad's Buick utility, which he had converted from a Silver Anniversary model Buick touring car, for which I had built the garage. While on the subject of this vehicle, which Dad had given me when I bought the home at Croydon, it never once failed to start at the first attempt, no matter how cold and frosty the night had been. It deserved being brought inside from out in the cold.

Having proved that I was fairly capable as a handyman, I advertised myself, in the local newspaper, as just that — handyman, gardener, rubbish remover. The Buick stood up to the job better than I did, on my first contract. The house owner, a self-confessed big wheel in the city, wanted the front garden dug and the couch grass removed. Couch was a curse in Victoria. Each surface runner, capable of extending from a mere millimetre to a metre in length, had to be removed to stop it proliferating again. The house owner did not understand that necessity, and he tore strips off me for going slow on the job. I was forced to offer my second job resignation in a matter of weeks (when I arrived in New South Wales, I found it hard to believe that house owners actually planted couch grass as lawns).

In my spare time, I was teaching myself to type and learn Pitman's shorthand. Betty Black was an extremely efficient typist and she helped me with both typing and testing my shorthand. As mentioned earlier, I had always taken a keen interest in writing. An incident which lingers in my memory involves trying to talk Melva into accepting this interest. The scene was Spencer Street Railway Station, the Melbourne terminal for country trains. It was

at the height of our marriage crisis. Melva was on the way home to her Wilson family at Harcourt. I had seen a vacancy advertised for a journalist on the Geelong newspaper. I thought if we could make a clean break with our current lives, it would be helpful. I spent a full hour or more trying to convince Melva. I was unsuccessful in my persuasion and she boarded the train for Harcourt, taking our two young daughters out of my life.

It would not have done any good, in any case – I applied for the job and was unsuccessful. In a belated – but related – instance, Melva rang me, wanting me to come back to the fold. She had returned to 'Melrose' at Croydon and contacted me at Black's. I said I would return, under the condition that I would make the major decisions affecting our lives. Melva could not, accept that condition. I have often had a sneaking suspicion that her offer was made under pressure from her family or friends. In any case, her refusal to consider my answer was clear cut, definite, made without any hesitation, without any suggestion that we may talk about it, Melva was like that. We were two equally determined people on opposite sides of the fence.

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Unbeknownst to me, at the time, Len and Betty Black's marriage remained unconsummated, Len being sexually impotent. Betty (hereinafter called Bet) stayed up helping me with my typing and shorthand long after Len had retired to bed. Both of us being sexually starved, the inevitable happened, It was the start of a happy, loving relationship that lasted 12 months short of 50 years, only ending with the death of my beloved in 2001.

I persevered with my typing, shorthand, and perusing the "Jobs Vacant" columns of newspapers. Bet encouraged me – a direct contrast to Melva.

chapter twenty five – life begins!

At last I hit the jackpot!!!

My application for a job on the Wangaratta Chronicle was accepted. I went off on my own, Bet promising to follow.

Little did I know that a fellow sergeant of the 38th, Bob Loudon, was the editor of the Chronicle. As mentioned earlier, he was a journalist with the Castlemaine Mail when he was called up for war service. From his experience with that newspaper, he would have known I was a cricketer. My name was ingloriously included in the Mail's sports result for two or three summers before I, too, was called up. Being an intelligence sergeant, I assume Bob would have been called upon to censor his share of letters, mine among them. So he would have known I had a good command of English language.

His wife had been a classmate of Melva's at Castlemaine High School. Consequently, through her family, she may have been aware of our marriage breakup and may have influenced Bob to try and bring about reconciliation. All of which is pure conjecture. The fact was Bob needed a sports writer, he knew me and knew I could write. So I filled the bill. Thus, every Sunday I became the sole occupant of the newspaper office.

The Chronicle was a tri-weekly, publishing Monday, Wednesday and Friday. My Sunday duty was to collect and tabulate all the cricket scores, it being summer when I started. Thus, the linotype operators would have copy prepared for them on Monday morning to convert into slugs of hot metal and, ultimately into columns of newsprint.

The letter accepting my application had been signed by the managing editor, Milton Lewis. Therefore I had no inkling of Bob being the editor. On arrival at Wangaratta, I was given a welcome by Bob in the lounge bar of a hotel in the main street. I was to learn that Bob held centre stage in that bar after work each day. Up to this point in my life, I was a non-drinker. The end result of my welcome was predictable – I staggered back to my hotel, in the adjoining side street, very drunk. This was the first of only three times I have been totally inebriated in my entire life.

I was only at the hotel for a few nights before the newspaper office found me a boarding house. It was situated between the junction of the King and Ovens Rivers. I was soon made aware of this location, waking up, after a night of heavy rain, to find we were virtually on an island, surrounded by floodwaters. I took photos of the flood, as seen from the boarding house, but they were never published.

I must tell you a story about Milton Lewis, as told by Dad, who had heard it from the man himself while drinking at the bar of the Castlemaine Hotel where Milton resided pre-war, when he was editor of the Mail. This is the story Dad told when he learned Milton was my new top boss.

Milton regularly travelled from Castlemaine to Melbourne on Saturdays after his weekly editorial duties were completed. On arrival in Melbourne, he normally met with a former colleague who was now on the editorial staff of the Argus, one of the two major daily newspapers. On this Saturday in particular, he was held up in Castlemaine by unexpected duties. To let his former colleague know of the delay, Milton sent a telegram. This is how it was worded:

"To the man in a trench coat walking up and down Elizabeth Street, outside the Argus building, I will be late."

He was a strange man – Milton. He lived alone in yet another hotel. He was good to me, giving me a weekend off to attend a Test cricket match in Melbourne, taking me on a tour of other newspapers in the same Victorian chain as the Chronicle, fostering my love of classical music sending me to report on such concerts. Mind you, I think Bob was influential in giving me the Test match visit.

I wrote an article in the Chronicle (signed – T.P.P.) that was harshly criticized by the Benalla (Wangaratta's neighbouring town) newspaper, much to the joy of Milton. I had been critical of the Australian cricket team's adoption of negative tactics similar to those used by the English team the previous day. The English tactics had roundly been condemned overnight by the two Melbourne dailies. I maintained the Aussies were equally at fault – even possibly more so – by using the same negative approach to the detriment of the cricketing spirit. My report was not well received by the local cricketing fraternity and drew scathing comment from the Benalla paper.

However, Milton was extremely pleased that my article had generated so much publicity. I wanted to reply to the Benalla criticism, but both Bob and Milton vetoed the idea. I found it hard to gauge Bob's reaction. On the one hand, I think he was concerned about the damage done to my rapport with the local cricketers; on the other hand he was pleased that I had written the story as I had seen it, not as the general pro-Australian would have seen it.

Apart from the cricket reports on a Sunday, I did general reporting, including minor court cases. The more serious court cases were written up by Mike Mooney. Tragically, he was killed in a fatal air accident soon after I had left the Chronicle. I am a little hazy about the details, but I think he was attempting to do a story about the thrills of parachute jumping. On his first jump, the parachute failed to open.

My one and only attempt at phoning in a story to catch a deadline was a dismal failure. I was supposed to cover a country fete. What can you report as newsworthy from a country fete? I suspect Bob had committed himself, for some reason or other, and I was the 'bunny' who was chosen to honour his commitment.

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After a few weeks, when it appeared I had passed a probationary period at the newspaper, I sent for Bet to come up. I must have retrieved Dad's Buick from Hampton, because it was to come in handy a short while later. With Bet's arrival imminent, I found a room to rent, with kitchen facilities, not far from the Chronicle. Bet and I shifted in together.

We became friendly with one of the linotype operators and his wife, Jim and Margaret Connell. They had us over to dinner a couple of times. Jim had a rifle and invited me to go out rabbit shooting. So we drove out of Wangaratta in the Buick to one of the nearby large rural properties. After a few practice shots at tins on top of fence posts, I found the rifle firing slightly to the right, thus needing to aim slightly left to compensate, we found no rabbits, but we did tree a big goanna. It climbed to the very tip of a 60 feet dead gum tree. Jim gave me first shot at it. Allowing for the drift to the right, I shot it clean through the eye. I never mentioned it to anyone, but I suspect Jim did, because I sensed a new respect for myself next day as I walked through the print room.

From the time Bet arrived, life in Wangaratta was idyllic. At the age of 34, I was doing what I had always wanted to do all my adult life, writing. Bet had encouraged me to become a writer, and continued to support my endeavours. However, it was too good to last.

Although we were legally married to different people – me to Melva, Bet to Len – we were living together as man and wife. That was not good enough for Milton, who probably knew from his Castlemaine Mail days that Melva was my wife, and had probably confirmed it with Bob. As mentioned before, Milton, in my eyes, was a strange man. I had my doubts about him. He could only have been married to a newspaper. Anyway, he demanded I break off my relationship with Bet, or else. I would not break with Bet, so the 'or else' came into effect – I was out of a job after only 12 months or so in it.



During my cricket reporting efforts, I had become friendly with some of the players. We met together at times for games of cards. When they became aware that I was leaving, they arranged for a last card night on the eve of our departure. We played all night until dawn, Bet plying us with biscuits to go with the beer. We eventually stowed all of our meagre possessions into the Buick utility and took off for Sydney. We chose Sydney because Bet's father, Arthur Pearce, was ill there. Bet had lost her mother, Florence, after a long illness, years before.

After his wife's death, Arthur had sold their home in the Melbourne suburb of Armadale and shifted to a flat at St. Kilda, where Bet looked after him until her marriage. Arthur then engaged a housekeeper, Alice, eventually marrying her. At his new wife's suggestion, they had shifted to Sydney, buying a house with a lakeside frontage in the seaside suburb of Narrabeen. At the age of 80, Arthur fathered a son, Arthur junior, a stepbrother for Bet. Now, Arthur junior was six years old, able to handle a small boat on the quiet waters of the lake, and his father was virtually confined to his bed. Hence our choice, Bet's and mine, of a new State of New South Wales in which to seek our fortune.

We had tried the bush town (now a city) of Wangaratta, now we were heading for Sydney ... a reverse case of the typically Australian proverb of 'Sydney or the bush. I have since seen a number of instances where Sydney-siders have failed and had to head for the bush. We were doing the reverse process, and – touch wood – I am still a Sydney-sider and Bet was, too, until her death four years ago.

chapter twenty six – life in suspension

I have said that life really began for me when I became a journalist in 1953, at the age of 33. I had to put that life – as a journalist – on hold for five years. But life had to go on and I had the best of helpmates in Bet. As life unfolded, it had its bright moments, I had Bet and together we enjoyed life in a new city.

However, we had yet to get there. As we reached Gundagai, we ran out of money. I had a cheque account with the Commonwealth Bank. I still do, but there have been a couple of hiccups along the way. The first of them occurred when I went into the bank's branch at Gundagai. I might just as well been the tramp whose dog sat on the tucker box four miles from Gundagai – or the dog itself for that matter. The bank staff did not want to know me.

This was before the age of computers. Nowadays, anywhere in Australia, a teller punches up a client's details on a computer. He or she knows instantly whether the client is financial. Then, there was no Bankcard, MasterCard or any other credit card. I spent hours in that Gundagai bank while interstate telephone calls were made to verify I had money in my account. Then, extra time was spent proving my identity before I could withdraw some of that money.

When, eventually, we were able to travel further along the Hume Highway and reach the rural city of Goulburn, I decided to try my luck at the city's daily newspaper. I was asked to rewrite a Sydney Morning Herald's front page story, of that day's issue, in approximately 100 words. They set me down in front of a newspaper's typically worn out typewriter.

I must have passed the test, as I was offered a job on the Moss Vale paper, a subsidiary of the Goulburn paper. I was inclined to accept the offer. However, I talked it over with Bet, who, I soon realized, had set her heart on reaching Sydney. So, I knocked the job back. In hindsight, it was probably just as well. I may not have lasted very long in the conservative sheep and cattle country of Moss Vale. I had passed muster in the more liberal-minded (note the small, lower-case 'l' in liberal) Wangaratta, where Labor dominated local government. Goulburn, probably, would have been a good home base, but Moss Vale, despite being Don Bradman country, may have been too up-market.

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So, on we went to Sydney. Looking back on the trip, I wonder at how game I was, driving through Sydney north to the seaside suburb of Narrabeen in a Buick car converted to a utility almost 30 years old. We eventually arrived in Narrabeen without any further dramas. Bet met her six year old stepbrother for the first time. Bet's father was not well, spending most of his time in bed.

I was very favourably impressed with the location of the house, on the shore of Lake Narrabeen. Young Arthur had his very own small rowboat. He and I had a couple of trips on the lake, fishing, without catching anything. The location on the lakeside made the Pearce property, regardless of the dilapidated state of the house, very valuable as a development site. After Bet's father died about four or five years within our arrival on the scene, his widow, Alice, sold the property for a small fortune. Alice later told Bet's cousin, May, that she had been worried Bet would contest her father's will. Probably we should have, but Bet maintained that if her father had wanted her to have any proceeds of property, he would have made such a provision in his will.

However, we were long gone before Mr. Pearce died. In the meantime, we had shifted to a granny flat his neighbour rented us.



My first attempt to find employment as a journalist in Sydney proved abortive. When we had arrived in Sydney, the Australian Journalists' Association was in the middle of a strike. I had joined the A.J.A. at Wangaratta. For a fleeting moment, I regretted turning down the job at Moss Vale. At least I would have had a job, however small the newspaper was and however distant it was from Bet's Dad. Common sense prevailed, the regret was short-lived. I knew Bet was much happier for having seen her father.

So, undeterred, I headed for the A.J.A. headquarters within the Journalists' Club, which was then in Castlereagh Street, near the Daily Telegraph building. (Now the club and A.J.A. head office for New South Wales is in Chalmers Street, near the former Daily Mirror building.) When I eventually found the Journalists' Club, I was deterred. Virtually all the journalists were flat out producing their own newspaper, called *Etaoin*. The name ETAOIN was taken from the letters of one line of the linotype keyboard, just as a possible alternative QWERTY are the first letters of a typewriter. It was obvious all the club members were so pre-occupied with their newspaper activities that no-one would be interested in my troubles – they had too many of their own. Regardless of troubles, no A.J.A. member, at the height of a strike, was going to help me get a job in a newspaper. They could not help me, and I felt I was too inexperienced to help them with their strike. Maybe I should have offered.

I went back to the granny flat and pondered my next move, which turned out to be a move to another flat. The Pearce neighbours wanted their own flat for some of their own relatives. Our new home was about a kilometre south along the lake's shore, almost into Narrabeen shopping centre. The flat was comprised of the smallest possible two rooms under the house-owner's garage. Our landlord, Mr. Butcher, was a widower, with a girlfriend who visited him once a week. We always knew when they had finished their love-making: 'Butch' would burst into song as he showered.

Bet soon found employment, as a typist in Sheila Blackmore's copying office, located in the heart of Sydney's CBD. It was in O'Connell Street, just up from the Sydney Morning Herald, which was then located on the Pitt-O'Connell Street corner. Bet was to be promoted, eventually, to office manager of Sheila's business. Bet was a very fast and very accurate typist, as well as a great work co-ordinator.

I tried to turn my hand to freelance writing. Fiction, I thought, would be better, easier than nonfiction, but I could not get started. Looking back, a good short story writer could have made something of Old Shav, Grandpa and his boat, bank trouble at Gundagai, Milton's reaction to 'living in sin' Even now, I would hardly know where to start.

In hindsight, I wonder why I did not persevere in attempting to gain a journalist's position in the metropolitan papers. At a guess, I probably felt apprehensive of applying for this type of job with my limited experience with a newspaper in the 'sticks'. At my age, I would have been competing against journo's who had 15 or more years of experience with Sydney dailies, from copy boys through D, C and B grades. I was only a C grade with less than two full years of country work.



Following a couple of months of fruitless, frustrating fiction writing, I saw an advertisement for itinerant ice-cream sellers. I thought this part-time weekend work would enable me to continue the writing struggle a bit longer. We had returned the Buick to Dad. Len had sold the house at Raynes Park Road, Hampton, and sent some of the proceeds to Bet. With part of the money, I had bought a Chevrolet utility, for 120 pounds (\$240). This allowed me to answer the ice-cream advertisement.

The ice-cream wholesaler had allotted me a territory, provided me with containers of ice-cream and a handbell. So, during the weekends and holidays, I was to be found ringing the bell vigorously and waiting for the kids to appear. Waiting was the secret of success. Too many sellers lost patience when no children appeared with the first peal of the bell. Sydney's fine weather allowed me to sell from the open utility at a reasonable profit each weekend. I had a lot of fun. Any activity with children, young people generally, was very congenial to me, and the youngsters responded very well to me.

I enjoyed the open air employment for two or three months, but I realized I was not contributing enough to living expenses, so I went to the Commonwealth Employment Service – the forerunner for many years to Centrelink, which now the Federal Government sponsored employment agencies are collectively called.

The only suitable employment available to an ex-journalist, ex-electrical-meter-tester was with a firm called Westcott-Hazell, in Castlereagh Street, next door but one south of Sydney Fire Brigade head-quarters. I doubt if the firm is still in existence. It dealt with motor vehicle accessories, similar to the present day firm of Repco.

I was employed in the buying department. Virtually, I was a stockroom clerk, keeping records on a card system, of sales, and, consequently, the need to buy more of each particular item. Such records are now automatically kept on computers, which did not exist in those days.

Bet and I travelled to and from work together and thus began, perhaps, one of the happiest times of our lives up to date; it certainly cemented the closeness of our relationship. Our trip to work entailed a long bus journey to Manly, where we boarded a ferry to Circular Quay, then short bus trips through Sydney proper to our respective offices.



About this time, we shifted residence two suburbs north to Mona Vale. Here we had a true beachside home: we stepped out of the front door directly onto the beach. Looking back, I, for one, did not appreciate the luckiness of our location. I am sure Bet did. I am not a seaside person – Bet was. I am more a country mountain type of person.

Anyway, the shift of living quarters meant a longer bus trip, not that I minded that. We mostly travelled on the upper deck of the double-decker buses that existed in those days. As Mona Vale was the terminus for our bus, we had little trouble in obtaining the front seat of the upper deck. These were highly prized seats because they provided an ideal uninterrupted view. For me, that made a joyful start of each working day.

That joy was enhanced as we boarded the ferry. Unless it was wet and windy, we preferred to sit out front in the open section. Regardless of the weather – or quite often because of it – the ferry trip put the seal on the start of the day. When I say “because of the weather”, I mean rough weather provided a highlight. The ferry rolled from side-to-side and pitched into the waves. The thrill of that added to the enjoyment, as far as Bet and I were concerned.

Quite often, Bet and I met after work. We would have an inexpensive meal and occasionally go to the theatre – a movie or a play – or a classical music concert at Sydney Town Hall (the Opera House had not yet been built). One of our favourite eating-houses was in a Pitt Street basement diner, where diners lined up on stools fronting a bar. It was there that we first tasted Chinese food. For years to come, Bet would order chicken chow mien (noodles) at Chinese restaurants and imagine she was back in this humble diner.

It was a great pleasure, too, for me to attend a classical concert with someone for whom the magic of the music lingered long after the last note was played. (after a concert Melva preferred, to go window-shopping and engage in conversation about fashion and furniture). Two of the performances that still linger in my memory are Beethoven's violin concerto played by David Oistrakh and the Emperor concerto played by Claudio Arrau. Up until her death, Bet would associate the Emperor with Arrau, you could not mention the great piano concerto without Bet mentioning her favourite pianist Claudio. They were synonymous as far as Bet was concerned.

The acoustics of the Town Hall were equal to, if not better than, the Opera House. Not that it made any difference to us – we were mostly in the cheapest organ-gallery seats. If anyone typified the saying ‘playing to the gallery’, it was the conductor Sir Bernard Heinze. As well as the Sydney Town Hall concerts with Bet, I had attended lunch hour concerts alone when working at Flinders Street. I gained the impression, as probably everyone in the organ gallery did, that Sir Bernard was conducting solely for my benefit. He virtually included the gallery in the orchestra by his conducting.



The work at Westcott-Hazell could not be described as exciting, but the workmates were interesting. My closest friend there was a former artillery officer during the war- Major if memory serves me well. Val, his name was. He lived at Mosman, across the harbor. Val left home each day at the crack of dawn, to catch one of the early ferries. After landing at Circular Quay, he made straight for a quayside hotel. This particular pub was licensed to open its bars early to cater for the waterside workers coming off night shifts. Consequently, Val always arrived at work very happy indeed, slightly more than half-plastered. It never affected his work. He was my senior in the motor accessories section of the buying office. For that reason, and the fact that the two of us were the only ex-servicemen, our friendship quickly developed.

The overseer of the whole office, Col, was a bright bloke; too bright for Westcott-Hazell. He eventually left to become manager of a Woolworth's store. Claude was French. When we retired to the Hyde Park Hotel, which was the custom each evening after work, he drank nothing else than ouzo, which I understand is a Greek liqueur. It is a clear, colourless drink until water is added, when it turns milky-white. I was fascinated by this effect, which probably reveals my lack of experience with intoxicating liquor at this stage of my life. Not that I am much the wiser even now.

One colleague who did not feature in our after work drinking sessions was Raffi. He was a survivor of a German internment camp, such as the notorious Auschwitz death camp. His prisoner's number, stencilled or tattooed on his arm, was still legible, and appeared genuine. He and his wife invited Bet and I to a typical Jewish dinner. The menu is completely forgotten, but it as was thoroughly enjoyable meal and evening.

The work at Westcott-Hazell was mind deadening, with no chance of promotion. Life with Bet in a new city, in a new environment, was thoroughly enjoyable, but I sensed the need to improve my workplace environment.



The next choice put forward by the Commonwealth Employment Service was as a technician with the Post Master General's Department, commonly referred to as the P.M.G. In those days, the department provided the only postal and telephone services Australia wide. It was later divided into two separate departments now known as Australia Post and Telstra. My tech school study of electrical engineering and my previous employment as an electrical meter tester obviously guided the employment service officer in his job offer. I was immediately accepted by the P.M.G. and sent to a training school.

The lessons on electrical theory were no problem, never rising above the mere basics. I could have learned them and passed the tests with my eyes shut. The only testing of brainpower was memorizing the colour code of individual wires in the standard telephone cable. Each wire was wrapped in insulation bearing a number of colours. To give some idea of the problem, there would have to be about 50 or more colour combinations. In the long run, I passed the final exams in flying colours, topping the course, with 100% in each subject.

Having become a fully-fledged technician, I was posted to a relatively new telephone exchange at Dee Why, a northern Sydney seaside suburb. This suited me, as we were still living at Mona Vale, only three suburbs further north. When interviewed by the exchange superintendent, I could not but help notice the querulous look on his face. This was interpreted as "What's this bloke doing in a job soldering joints in cable with these qualifications? Is he after my job?"

Maybe his doubts were put to rest after a couple of weeks in the job. We soldering soldiers sat in front of terminal boards joining cables to the terminals. When not engaged in actual soldering, the hot irons were hung on a conveniently adjacent hook. One day I missed the hook and automatically reacted to catch the iron as it fell. I caught it ... on the hot end! The result was a week's sick leave and three weeks on light duties following that.

After my initiation into the job at the exchange, I was allowed out into the field, under the guidance of an expert technician. One of the first jobs we did involved a larger team in a dingy second story room at the rear of a building in George Street, Sydney. Although it was in the heart of the central business district of the largest city in Australia, this room was only accessible by an outside wooden staircase. We had to install a P.A.B.X. switchboard, which was connected to a number of incoming lines and serving at least 12 telephones on separate tables in the large room. The client was a starting price bookmaker.

Starting price bookmaking was an illegal practice, but it didn't matter, apparently, to the P.M.G. hierarchy. The bookie required the job to be completed in a single day, hence the size of the team. At the end of the day, mission accomplished, we each received, directly from the hand of the man himself, a five-pound note, equivalent to \$40 or \$50 in today's currency.

My first job as a 'lone hand', fully authorized technician, had more than a hint of glamour about it. Again, it was the installation of a P.A.B.X. switchboard, but the location could hardly been much more different. It was in the Berlei Lingerie warehouse. So there I was, the sole male, surrounded by brassieres, corsets, and girls galore. The female pulchritude wasn't confined to the multitude of life-size posters blazoning the virtues of Berlei foundation garments. All of the female staff was apparently employed for their ability to display those garments in the flesh. I made the job last as long as I could.

However, very few of telephone installations had such pleasant backgrounds. It was an easy job, but I yearned for something more challenging. Had I stayed in the job, I would have ended up in a senior Telstra position, like my nephew David Allen, Shirley's son. But

then I would never have had my journalistic life resurrected, and that would have been a bad thing.



In pursuit of a more interesting job, I studied the 'jobs vacant' columns in the daily papers. One advertisement caught my eye. It called for a site clerk with the New South Wales Electricity Commission. Requirements included Typing and knowledge of shorthand. I had been studying Pitman's shorthand at a night school in Manly. So I applied for the position and was successful.

Early in 1958, as a result, Bet and I shifted to Warragamba. The NSW S.E.C. was building a hydro-electric power station to be operated by the huge Warragamba Dam when both projects were completed. Sydney Water Board (now called Sydney Water) had been constructing the dam for 10 years. It was eventually to hold much more water than Sydney Harbour.

The Electricity Commission provided housing for its staff. The engineer, Maurie Bramham, and the works foreman (whose name, I don't remember) were allocated homes in the exclusive executive area of the town of Warragamba. The remainder of the staff, comprising of engineering tradesmen Barry Dennis and Bob Jones and I, as the site clerk were housed in the workers cottage. Although on small blocks of land, these homes were quite comfortable. Bet always remembered the wood-fire heater with love and great affection.

Not so loving in her memory is the engine of my Studebaker car, which adorned our dining room table for weeks. Barry Dennis, the powerhouse engineer tradesman, who lived close by, did most of the restoration of that engine. I was very proud of that car – the first of the back-to-front cars. By that, I mean car bodies, previously did not protrude to any large degree at the rear. Boots, as we know them today, did not exist. In the Studebaker, the boot and the bonnet were similarly shaped to a rounded point, so that, at a distance, it was difficult to distinguish between the front and the back.

Ninety-nine percent of Warragamba township population comprised workers on the dam. The other one percent comprised shopkeepers, schoolteachers and the like. There was no hotel, as such, the equivalent was a club, more truly called the Warragamba Workers' Club than similarly named clubs, such as Blacktown Workers' Club, for example.

My boss, the engineer Maurie Bramham, was a thorough gentleman, who cheerfully put up with my hesitant shorthand and rough typing. Our site office was located alongside the clanking cable of buckets carrying the gravel from Emu Plains some eight to 10 miles away. The slowly moving buckets were suspended from cables supported by towers on the same principle as ski lifts. Coincidentally, after Wendy was born and I was working for the Nepean Times, we were to live close to those towers at Emu Plains, the other end of that cable line.

The gravel, quarried from the original bed of the Nepean River, included large water-worn stones as big as footballs (The Nepean River, throughout the centuries had wandered along varying routes). At the Warragamba end of the bucket line, this conglomeration of variable stone sizes formed the aggregate base of the concrete used in the dam wall. Wall construction was almost up to spillway level when I arrived on the scene. The power station site was a vast, deep concrete hole downstream of the wall. Before the power station lift was installed, access – and exit – for workers at the turbine level was by a series of long vertical ladders tied to the wall. I was tempted to go down and back – once – and once only. It was a terrifying trip.

In addition to the social atmosphere provided by the Workers' Club, workers and their families could avail themselves of various recreational activities. There was a football and cricket oval. Tennis players had their own courts. A theatre showed movies. Card games

and dances were held in the town hall. Gardens and picnic areas were beautifully laid out. All-in-all, Warragamba township was a good place to be.

Strangely enough, with all that water around, fishing was forbidden in the main dam area. I did try fishing in the little water which was allowed to by-pass the dam into the Warragamba River and about five kilometres downstream where it joined the larger Nepean River at the neighbouring township of Wallacia. I always managed to bring home one or two fish, but I never had any great success.

Bet soon landed a job in Penrith, the largest town on the Nepean River, soon to become a city, and since the mid-1800's the seat of local government for the Warragamba area. Her new job was at the office of the local newspaper, the Nepean Times. The paper was founded by the father of the then owner, Syd Colless, in 1882. Syd's father had been Mayor of Penrith at, or about, the same time.

It was a weekly paper, broadsheet, published on Thursdays. Syd's son, Roger, the office manager, had a saying: "It always happens on a Thursday", alluding to the frequent problems that occurred on publishing days. Bet was the bookkeeper, and, to my mind, as much office manager as Roger was. She loved the bus run from Wallacia to Penrith. It virtually ran from the foothills of the Blue Mountains to the flat land, beneath the foothills, of Penrith.

The Warragamba foothills proved a huge problem when delivery time came for the massive turbine to be installed in the power station. It became a major operation for the transporting contractors, Jones Brothers. The only access road available was through the township to the brink of the Warragamba River gorge slightly downstream of the dam wall. From there, a dirt road wound sharply downward, involving a hairpin bend halfway to the bottom. The turbine was mounted on a low, long, multi-wheeled trailer, with a self-steered bogie at the rear. Negotiating the 'devil's elbow' became a tricky piece of co-ordination between the main driver and the secondary driver standing on and steering the bogie. Unbeknown to me at the time, the main driver in control was Maurie Jones, who some 10 or so years later sat with me on the board of Smithfield Rotary Club.



My journalistic career started getting back on track at the ripe old age of 40!!!

With Bet working at the Nepean Times, I submitted four or five stories (short news items – in the news rooms, all items of news were "stories"). These stories concerned various activities at the dam site. The memory bank does not recall the content or context of these news items. Possibly – most probably – one, at least, would have been about the floods in the Nepean River, which isolated the Warragamba community. The Nepean Bridge at Wallacia at the time was inundated, blocking off Warragamba from Mulgoa Road, the access road to Penrith and the rest of Sydney, for that matter (After the dam had been completed, the Wallacia Bridge was reconstructed and raised above former flood levels).

During floods, Bet had to make a detour in the bus through Silverdale, Oakdale and Camden, at which town the bus connected with Bringelly Road (now re-named the Northern Road, apart from a short section near Penrith). Running parallel to Mulgoa Road, but further east, Bringelly Road completed the trip to Penrith for Bet, after travelling three times the distance of her normal daily bus ride.

The dam at full flood was a spectacular sight. Warragamba River gushed out over the nearly completed wall with a roaring sound, which was audible at a distance of some kilometres. I still have photographs showing this huge 'waterfall', taken from the high level footbridge linking the gorge banks 200 metres downstream. One story I definitely wrote for the Nepean Times was the official opening of the dam. As my previous efforts had come to the notice of the Water Board authorities, I was given an invitation to join the official party as a press representative. Following the ceremony, the board put on a lavish sit-down meal

for all of us big-wigs. Full details of the menu escape my memory. I do remember enjoying the recently acquired taste for oysters, and I vaguely remember another favourite- Pavlova. I don't think it could have been topped off with lobster, I would have remembered that, but I think there must have been some mouth-watering cold collation of some sort. All in all, the Water Board lived up to its reputation for 'turning-it-on'.

I repaid the board by 'singing for my supper' with a long article in the Nepean Times, complete with photographs. For the pictures, I was duly indebted to the board's resident official photographer, with whom I had struck up a rapport. He had previously given me photos to accompany my flood stories.

As the construction of the power station neared completion, there were plans for us four staff members to move to a new proposed power station site on the central NSW coast. There now occurred one of life's gloriously strange coincidences, somewhat akin to Bob Loudon being at the right spot (Wangaratta) at the right time; my start in journalism. (Strange, too, was the similarity of the names, Wangaratta and Warragamba).

Bet discovered she was pregnant. While this was joyful news, Bet was only a year younger than I was. At 39, late in life for a first pregnancy, she was faced with making a new home in an unknown country area, perhaps far from a hospital. So we decided to stay in the Penrith area. Now comes the amazing coincidence – at the same time, the Nepean Times editor, Charlie Fuller, was arranging a sabbatical year, touring England. On the strength of those few news reports of Warragamba, Charlie recommended me to take over his duties during his absence overseas.

So Bet and I bade farewell to Warragamba and rented a home at Glenbrook.

chapter twenty seven – life revives at Nepean Times

Now began a magical time for me: it was as if I became fully alive again in 1960.

I doubt if I can do full justice to the way I felt. For one thing, the approaching birth of our child fulfilled a gapping hole in my life: parenthood. The loss of Barbara and Judith from my life had torn my heartstrings severely.

And I was back in what I had come to recognize was my life's work – journalism. I started to make contacts and to start again compiling that most important journalist's 'bible' – a contact book of telephone numbers. Continuing the Wangaratta experience, the first contacts were in the sporting sphere: football (in direct contrast to Wangaratta's cricket) and rowing mainly.

I should mention, at the outset, that the editorial staff at the Nepean Times was one – I was that one – copy boy, sports writer, news reporter, sub-editor, proof reader, editor. A steep learning curve confronted me before I could start reporting football. I had to learn the rules and intricacies of rugby league. Fortunately, the president of Penrith Rugby League Club, Dave Fitzgerald, was an ex-Victorian. He, too, had to convert from Australian Rules football before he could work his way up to club leadership.

When I first reported rugby league, Penrith was in a minor competition, centred on Parramatta. Nowadays, it has progressed as far as it can go in Australia, twice winning the championship of the top interstate competition. In those early days, the club building was an army dismountable hut. Within 12 months, a double-storey building, complete with the inevitable poker machines and a very welcome restaurant had been built alongside the hut in Station Street. Since my days at Nepean Times, the club, now known as the Panthers, has spread to a huge complex, occupying more area than a city block on what was then an open paddock fronting Mulgoa Road. As we will see as this chapter unfolds, I take some credit for originating the name "Panthers".

In those days, the only 'grandstand' at Penrith Park, the Panthers' home ground, comprised two planks, old railway sleepers, on the sideline, opposite the centre, or kick-off, line. I shared the seating arrangement with the sports commentator from Radio 2KA, Katoomba. We 'plonked' our bottoms on the topmost raised sleeper and rested our feet on the lower one. Occasionally, a microphone was thrust before my face requesting a comment on a

brilliant Penrith play. Knowing little about the tactics behind the brilliance, I would be forced to stammer some non-descript reply. Nowadays, grandstands house thousands of patrons on both sides of the football field, and plans are under way to greatly increase their size.

Following the games, I mingled with the beer-drinking supporters, at the clubhouse, listening to their comments, posing the odd question and occasional comment of my own. In that way, I was able to glean enough to fill a column or two in next week's edition. The opposition paper, the Penrith Press, barely covered the final result.

Rowing, too, was a strange sport for me. Penrith has always been the rowing course for the main state and interstate events. Then, it was the Nepean River, with its level raised by the weir downstream of the highway and railway bridges. Now, it is part of the Nepean Lakes scheme, based on the vast sand quarrying projects and still fed by the Nepean River. Unlike Penrith's minor role in the state rugby league circles at that time, the all-important rowing events were fully covered by the metropolitan newspapers and radio (pre-TV). That meant, so far as rowing was concerned, the results of such races as the Head-of-the-River and the King's Cup (pre-Queen Elizabeth 11) were 'dead' news when the Nepean Times was published the following Thursday. So, a different 'angle' was required. This was achieved by behind-the-scenes co-operation of the rowing club, in the provision of comparisons with previous years' training methods, styles, and so on.

The club's officers were all friendly. That made the task easier. Club members gave me the nickname of 'Ed'. I had continued a column headed 'Fifty Years Ago' and had started another title 'Smoke Signals from the Tepee', being a play on my initials 'T.P'. These two columns and other general news stories, for that matter, required the occasional footnote, which I normally signed "...Ed.", an abbreviation for 'Editor'. Hence, the nickname came into being.



Our concentration on sporting stories, which the Penrith Press barely touched, soon had the editorial management of Cumberland Newspapers, the opposition's publishers, concerned. When we were continually beating them, too, on later-breaking general news stories, they started playing dirty tricks. (Penrith Press was published each Wednesday, the day before our paper. Because Cumberland Newspapers printed so many different papers, shifting the Penrith publishing date back a day would have had a drastic effect on the presses tight schedule).

Cumberland's first attack concerned me personally, as well as Mr. Colless generally. They maintained the Nepean Times was employing non-union staff, in that I was not a member of the Australian Journalists' Association, I had applied for membership of the AJA. Not having been a member for five years, and only in Victoria, at that, made it difficult. My advanced years didn't help. Most members joined as teenagers, or in the early 20's at the latest. Cumberland obviously branded me as a 'fly-by-night' merchant. However, after protracted negotiations, my application was accepted; I again became a fully-fledged member of the AJA. Indeed, the AJA was to fight for my rights when an occasion arose later, but that was some 10 years in the future.

The next Cumberland attack followed closely on the membership debacle. It, too, involved the AJA, this time it was all about the number of hours I worked. News gathering in a semi-rural environment, as Penrith was, still, in 1960, involved attending meetings of various organizations- local government (council), hospital, school, and kindergartens, progress association, Rotary, sports clubs, churches, agricultural shows. You name it, the Nepean Times, meaning yours truly, was at that meeting. Indeed, the meeting did not start, on many occasions, until the mayor of the day and, of course, the Nepean Times put in an appearance.

Invariably, those meetings were held at night. The only exception was Friday night. I refused to attend Friday night meetings. Friday nights were reserved for the family. Virtually, I was

working at least 10 hours daily Monday to Thursday, eight hours on Friday, a minimum of four hours on Saturday, and occasionally the odd hour or two on Sunday.

Cumberland did not like that. They prevailed on the AJA, again, to do something about it. Each newspaper was supposed to have a time-book, in which journalists entered the daily hours they worked. No journalist was supposed to work more than eight hours daily and only five days each week. There was a proviso – those working longer hours had to be paid special rates, known in the trade as 'off-the-time-book'. In our case, that of a country weekly, the going rate was that of editor. Mr. Colless was forced to pay a massive increase in my salary. I offered to revert to my A grade rate, but Syd would not hear of it.

The next Cumberland attack was an ongoing affair, based on the two papers differing means of production, publication, and distribution. Nepean Times was a broadsheet, Penrith Press was the more popular tabloid size; Nepean Times was a bought paper – readers had to buy it. Penrith Press was a free paper – thrown over the fence; a circulation figure of some 30,000 was claimed by Cumberland for the Penrith Press, whereas the audited circulation of Nepean Times was somewhat fewer than 10,000.

The three tough, streetwise salesmen selling advertising space in the Press made a great play on these circulation figures. Our sole man on the streets, Syd's son Roger Colless, trained in banking, was a gentleman of the old school, but a salesman he was not. The opposition's ad-men, too, emphasized the difference in production. The Times was printed on a flatbed press designed and made in the late 1800's; headline and display type had to be handset; whereas the Press had about eight, or perhaps as many as 10 (memory fails), different font types, machine set, up to at least 72 point in size and was printed on a huge rotary press of the latest design. I must mention here that Roger Colless was not ordained to join the family newspaper. That position had been planned for his brother, but he was killed in the war. Therefore, Roger had to sacrifice a brilliant banking career in order that the family newspaper could survive.

I, too, must admit I was not in the same street as my opposite number on the Press, John Upton. He also was the sole editorial staff on a paper that ran to three or more times the number of pages weekly (28/32 pages compared to the Times' 8/12). John was fast and accurate. Because he had a greater number of pages to fill, he had more stories than I had, although they were mostly confined to local government. However, I did manage to scoop him on several general news stories, as well as my weekly scoop on sport.

Apart from my efforts with Rugby League and rowing, we had regular contributors in such sports as soccer, tennis and cricket. Our linotype operator, Bill Elkington, was a keen sportsman and office-bearer (secretary, mainly) of Penrith Bowling Club. He transcribed directly to 'hot metal' the hand-written tennis, cricket and his own bowls reports. (Hot metal formed the letters that printed the paper).

In general news from various organizations, we virtually had the same contributors as the Penrith Press, so we did not miss out in that regard.



The only problem I had with preventing John Upton from scooping me was our publishing days. Penrith Press hit the streets on Wednesday, a day ahead our Thursday publication. There were only the two papers then. Now, in 2005 – 45 years later – there are three: the Penrith Press, published on Tuesday and Thursday; Penrith City Star on Wednesday; and the Weekender, published on Friday.

Most of our big stories emanated from Penrith Council, yet to become a full-blown city council, which met every second Tuesday night. This meant John Upton, working under pressure to meet his 10am Wednesday deadline, was able to get the main story on the front page a day ahead of me. Of course, he had managed, also, to glean minor council stories from the council business papers, copies of which we had both received on the Monday or

Tuesday before the meeting. These were mainly cut-and-dried committee decisions, devoid of controversy, which John was also able to sprinkle through the same issue.

However, given the extra day, I was able to publish more of the important stories a week ahead of the opposition. This was one advantage I had. There remained the problem of countering John's advantage of writing and publishing the main story of the week a day ahead of the Times; in other words, scooping me every second week.

The big story of the time was controversial. A developer, by the name of Graf, wanted to build a shopping complex, which he called Penrith Plaza. The controversy arose through the location, some 300 yards away from the existing business centre. Shopkeepers, large and small, from Fletcher's semi-super-market, Murray's hardware, Neal's furniture to the one man/woman barber, florist cake shop, fought the project tooth-and-nail.

Council, located then in a relatively new substantial Station Street building just within the CBD, was closest to the proposed project and was divided on the issue. Labor Party aldermen were told by party head-quarters to vote in favour of the development. A couple of the party aldermen broke ranks in committee meetings, not open to the press. They were hauled into Sydney by the hierarchy to 'please explain' and were given the proverbial rap over the knuckles. When the question came to the vote in open council the following Tuesday, the renegades towed the party line and voted for the project. So John Upton, on Wednesday after the council meeting, came out with the story that the ruling Labor faction of aldermen had approved the project.

In the meantime, the whole story about the committee room fight, the flight to Sydney and the consequent reprimand, had been leaked to me. I was told about it by a school principal, a woman close to one of the leading NSW Labor Party officials, known as 'the enforcer'. He did it, obviously, as extra punishment for the two backsliders, but it was too good a story for me to ignore. So I had what all journalists strive for – a completely different 'angle' on a previously published story.

John Upton did not 'scoop' me on that council week story. However, the 'enforcer's' punishment was far worse than even he expected – one of the two aldermen concerned had a heart attack when the Nepean Times hit the street. I was upset, too, prone to regret my action in writing the story, even though it had true publication value. The alderman soon recovered sufficiently to resume his council duties, though we were never buddies in the future.

Earlier in the Penrith Plaza saga, the Mayor of Penrith, Alderman Leo Spies, was almost a lone voice supporting the developer, Graf. The mayor, whose name was pronounced 'spees', was very much in favour of the development, and being the leading Labor alderman, was very powerful. He was beaten badly one night, trying to gain council approval for the project. Having written the story for the front page, I wanted to make the headline:

**GRAF-
SPIES
SUNK**

I showed the front-page layout, with that heading included, to the boss, Syd Colless, who, as the main compositor, would compose the page, along with the help of Bill Elkington. Syd did not approve, probably because of the heading's wartime connotations and possibly because he was too much of a gentleman to cast aspersions on the mayor. So the heading was scrapped and a gentler one substituted.

For those readers unfamiliar with the wartime story, the sinking of the German battleship, Graf Spee, was a major blow to the enemy in World War II. (Readers are reminded the mayor's name was pronounced 'spees')



When I had been at the Nepean Times for about two months, word was received that the former editor, Charlie Fuller, had died overseas. His long leave of absence to enjoy a world trip of a lifetime ended in tragedy. His trip and his life had been sadly shortened. As I had been employed on the understanding that I was only in the job until Charlie returned, my position was in jeopardy. Fortunately, Mr. Colless decided to take me on permanently. I have always had a sneaking suspicion that his decision was influenced by Bet's association with the paper and the, by now, obvious signs of her pregnancy. The whole Colless family was very fond of Bet, regarding her almost as one of the family. So much so that Roger's wife was very helpful when Bet had trouble breast-feeding Wendy.

They, with Bill Elkington and his wife, Eve, helped span the gap caused by the absence of any of Bet's family.

Charlie Fuller's death also left a gap in the newspaper's life. He had been immensely popular and I could only hope my efforts could fill that gap successfully. Our Thursday publication date helped me to beat Penrith Press on all but one of major stories during council week. However, I had a continual struggle for front-page news on the non-council week. Bill Elkington repeatedly offered to make an interesting story by starting a fire in Station Street, outside our office.

One of my most far-reaching scoops, reverberating even today, 40 years later, made headlines even in the metropolitan dailies when they picked up the story. (It never rated a mention in the Penrith Press; they were too late off the mark.) Early in the week, probably on the Monday, I received a phone call from a property owner at Mulgoa, midway between Penrith and Warragamba. The owner, a woman, claimed a marauding animal was upsetting her cattle, dogs and other stock at night. A set of outsize hoof prints had been left. I decided to investigate.

The property almost bordered on Wallacia, some 12 kilometres south of Penrith. Directly across the Nepean River, which ran at the rear of the property, was Warragamba Dam, some six kilometres up into the foothills. In fact, the twin pipelines from the dam cut across a corner of the property at the start of their journey to supply water to Sydney. Across the river, wild bushland, in its natural state, became part of Blue Mountains National Park. (It later, in the year 2000, was listed as a World Heritage Area, placing it on a par with the Pyramids and the Taj Mahal).

One theory put forward by local residents was that the marauder was an escaped tiger or panther from Bullen's circus, the circus owners had a 'resting paddock' for animal's half-way between Penrith and Wallacia when the circus was not active. (This was before Bullens built a mansion at Wallacia and charged a fee for patrons driving through the grounds to view the resting animals. The time also pre-dated the establishment of Warragamba Lions Park, adjoining the dam, where carloads of people toured the park in similar fashion.)

The locals claimed the monster animal roamed the Blue Mountains forest area following its escape. Their theory did not explain the means adopted by the panther or tiger in crossing the Nepean River to reach the forest and re-crossing the river to deposit the recent paw-prints at the Mulgoa property. On the basis of not allowing the truth to spoil a good story, I glossed over that dilemma.

Having obtained the story details, I returned to Penrith for materials to make a plaster cast of the paw-print. Hardware store proprietor Alan Murray, a personal friend, helped me in this regard, as I had only a vague knowledge of this task. The plaster cast was successful. After taking photographs of the cast and of a matchbox, for contrast, I prevailed on Roger Colless to have printing blocks made to run with the story. That made my front page for that week. I was satisfied with having scooped the Penrith Press. I was prepared to let it go at that – I had my front page and there would be council stories for next week's front page.

Little did I imagine the furore that I had started. I don't remember if I had coined the names 'Penrith Panther' or 'Mulgoa Monster' but they were featured in the events that followed. The metropolitan dailies, specially the Daily Mirror (now defunct), picked up the story (and the names) and ran with it the next day, Friday. On Saturday and Sunday, car loads of armed hunters from Sydney and environs were targeting the Mulgoa Monster or the Penrith Panther, whichever name was preferred.

By the weekend, too, workers on the Warragamba-Sydney pipelines had made an ironwork skeleton image depicting the 'monster'. The workers had a hut on the fenceline of Mulgoa Road, the road linking Penrith and Wallacia. For many months, the roof above the hut was adorned by that model monster, a landmark reminding everybody of the story.

The Mulgoa monster was never caught, but periodically sightings are made and reported of monsters roaming the foothills of the Blue Mountains, even to this day, some 40 years later. There was one long-lasting legacy of the Mulgoa Monster. At least, I like to think the monster and Penrith Panthers, the rugby league team, are linked together. Penrith rugby league team had not earned their nickname at that stage – they were still in second division, a minor competition. It was not until the 70's, or even later, I believe, that the team was promoted to the senior interstate competition. They then joined such teams as the Balmain Tigers, St. George Dragons and Parramatta Eels. I like to think that someone remembered the roaming panther – the Mulgoa monster – and coined the name Penrith Panthers, long after I had left the scene.



It wasn't the reason for me leaving the scene, but, for political reasons, I had been threatened with "being run out of town". The threat came from the deposed Liberal member for Nepean in the state parliament, Bill Chapman.

By this time, I had become a member of Penrith Rotary Club, being nominated by the town's principal jeweller, John Empson. So that meant Bill Chapman and I were fellow Rotarians, albeit I being very junior in terms of club service. That did not stop Bill from threatening me with loss of town citizenship. Leading up to the election, which Bill lost, I had endeavoured to give equal coverage between Chapman and the Labor (ALP) candidate, Alf Bennett, despite my background favouring the latter (Bennett was a descendant of the family concern that built the famous bullock-wagons that hauled bales of wool over the Blue Mountains in pioneering days).

Chapman had been one of those rare politicians who had never been recorded as having spoken in parliamentary debate, nor on any subject. If my memory serves me correctly, he had only to be re-elected for a third or fourth term to be able to retire with a huge pension. I assume that was the reason for his extreme bitterness on being defeated, for which he blamed me. For all his silence in parliamentary sittings, he was a good member for his constituents, doing a lot of work behind the scenes.

One of Bennett's winning policies was the up-grading of the Northern Road, a major road feeding traffic into Penrith from the south. It was a promise soon kept after his election, but badly kept, as it was too hurried, not well planned. Chapman's threat to "run me out of town" fell by the wayside. I do not know if any pressure was brought to bear by fellow Rotarians, or even Syd Colless.

Bill Chapman was subsequently re-elected as the Member for Nepean at the next state election. I was no longer at the Nepean Times when that occurred. In the meantime, we were reconciled to the extent that Bill Chapman was one of the prime movers in having me elected as foundation president of Penrith Kindergarten.



Our daughter Wendy was born in June 1960, some six months or more after I started at Nepean Times. We were living at Glenbrook. On the night of June 8, Bet complained of having indigestion from the steak-and-kidney pie we had for dinner. She had never suffered from indigestion, so I said "Come on, my girl, we are off down to Nepean District Hospital; that's labour pain, not indigestion."

Sure enough, our lovely daughter Wendy was born next morning. Bet had always been very fond of Iceland poppies, so I managed to buy her a huge bunch. Later, she was always ready to tell the story of another new mother in her ward recoiling in fear of the bees that homed in through the hospital window on those poppies.

Right from the start, Wendy was "Daddy's girl". She was a Pellas in looks, with a strong Leversha influence from her grandmother (Later in life, perhaps starting in her 'teens, Wendy grew closer to Bet, as perhaps most daughters do to their mothers). Soon after she was born, we shifted from Glenbrook to Emu Plains, renting a house on Pat Wines' dairy property. Wendy still likes telling of the days when she rode on Dad's shoulders over to the dairy to get the milk.

Another of Wendy's popular reminiscences is based on the main western railway line that bordered the dairy land. We had a wood-or-coal-burning heater in the lounge room. I used to take Wendy over to the railway line, looking for coal. Most of the freight trains, particularly the long distance country trains, were hauled by coal burning steam trains. Lumps of coal frequently fell by the trackside. When we came across a large lump, we would say "this is a bobby-dazzler". That expression became our catchphrase for anything excellent. It carried through to the present day. Therefore, it came as no surprise that Wendy bestowed their purebred collie, the pedigree title including "Dazzler", with the pet name of "Bobby".

When I had settled at Emu Plains, I grew gladioli for sale to florists' shops. I grew them on the normal sized house block, alongside the house. The cow manure from the dairy, which Pat Wines generously gave me, enabled me to produce good flowers. As a starting point, I sent away an order from a nursery in the Victorian Mt. Dandenong area for at least 200, or maybe 500 bulbs.

At the first sign of the buds opening, I arose at 5am, cut the stems and gathered them into bunches of the appropriate number, as set by the marketing authority. I was down at the St Marys florist's shop when the lady owner opened the doors. I had known her previously, because she had featured in some news stories. I obtained the weekly market reports from the state horticultural department, charging the wholesale prices mentioned in the reports. The florist, whose name now escapes me, could not get enough of my gladioli. When we much later shifted residence to Smithfield, our Emu Plains neighbour, a Dutchman, specifically wanted as many of the bulbs as possible, particularly requesting the orange-flowered bulbs.

Wendy would have been about three years old at the peak of my market gardening phase. I still have a photo of my mother nursing Wendy with the garden of gladioli also appearing in the picture. Dad having died in 1958, two years before I started at Nepean Times, Mum was more freely able to come and stay with us.

It was about the time of the photo, maybe a bit earlier, that the Nepean Times closed down. I still believe I matched the Penrith Press in newsworthiness. The problem was that Roger could not match the combined results of the three Penrith Press advertising salesmen. The point came where we were losing money right and left (My high salary, forced on me by AJA rules of employment didn't help). Something had to be done. Mr. Colless closed the paper, but kept the job printing business.

chapter twenty eight – Cumberland Newspapers

When word got around that Nepean Times was going to close as a newspaper, I was offered a chance by a Richmond paper to supply news content for a new Penrith edition the owner proposed to publish.

I was shown around the Richmond printing press by the proprietor, who was also a fellow Rotarian. I rewrote two or three news items, as a test, passing with ease. However, I could not see the Richmond paper succeeding in Penrith against Rupert Murdoch and his Penrith Press, part of the Cumberland Newspaper chain.

Cumberland had also offered me a job, starting up a new newspaper in St. Marys, a suburb of Penrith. It was to be called the St. Marys Times, thus hoping to retain some of the Nepean Times readers. Nobody told me that Syd Colless, in the goodness of his heart, had negotiated with Cumberland for me to be transferred to their staff, but I have always thought he did.

So, I went with the strength – St Marys Times and Cumberland, based at Penrith Press office. Eventually, I found myself writing part time for the Penrith Press, as St Marys Times only ever managed eight pages. And, it was always subservient to the Penrith Press anyway. I did find St Marys Rotary Club helped me gain a foothold in the town, but Cumberland and those self-same Penrith Press advertising salesmen channelled any worthwhile advertising into the well-established Penrith Press.

While I was at the Penrith Press office, on a greatly reduced salary, Bet went back to work, having arranged with Bill Elkington's wife, Eve, to baby-sit Wendy. Her new job was office manager at Kralco Printing, based in the Sydney central business district. This firm was operated by John Forsyth, whose father owned and managed a leading bookstore, Dymock's, also in the Sydney CBD. Long after Bet worked for him, John Forsyth succeeded his father in the bookstore business, about the time he, John, was involved in a tragic accident. He and his wife were in a helicopter, his wife leaned too far out while taking photographs, falling to her death.

Bet going back to work led to a hectic life style for the three of us. I had traded in the Studebaker for yet another second-hand car, a Plymouth. With it, I took Bet to Penrith to catch the 7.30am train to Sydney, then on to Bill Elkington's home in Derby Street for Eve to look after Wendy. About 9am, I returned to Derby Street to take Wendy to kindergarten. At

3.00pm it was the return kindergarten-Derby St. Run to deposit Wendy until I picked up Bet at the railway station, Wendy at Eve's, and on to home.

I was only president of the kindergarten for about 12 months, but I acted as Santa Claus for two Christmas tree parties there for the young ones. I had little faith in the traditional whiskers and beard to hide my face from Wendy, but she did not penetrate the disguise, sitting excitedly on my Scandinavian lap, content with the thought that I had just flown in from the top of the world, instead of having just driven the Plymouth from the office.

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Having to turn up at Rotary dinner each week, on Tuesday nights, turned into a bit of a chore, but, having made the effort, I enjoyed the fellowship. One community service that Penrith played a major part involved the clean-up after a massive flood of the Nepean River. It took me back to my rural origin, when all the orchardist community rallied around to help another orchardist in distress. The Nepean flood ruined crops of vegetable farmers downstream of Penrith. We Rotarians scraped mud off the floors of homes and sheds, scrubbed mud off walls and windows, and tidied up generally after the water had subsided.

I was still at the Nepean Times when that flood occurred in 1962 or 63. The story I wrote for the front page, with photos, earned me high praise from one alderman, Bernie Fowler. As I have mentioned previously, I think, he lived at Wallacia, on the bank of the Nepean, and he had seen many a flood throughout the years. I had contacted the State Rivers and Water Board, as it was known then, and obtained statistics for all the major floods in the history of the river. So the front page featured a table of flood dates, levels reached, and major damages inflicted. That was yet another scoop success for the Nepean Times against the Penrith Press.

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When Wendy was being baby-sat at Eve Elkington's, she began a life-long friendship with Jenny Gardiner, who lived opposite in Derby Street. Jenny was Wendy's matron-of-honour at her wedding and they still get together occasionally at Christmas time, although Jenny, her husband, Rev. Stephen Robinson, and family live at Port Macquarie, while Wendy, Michael and family still live in the Penrith suburb of Orchard Hills.

Wendy started primary school at Emu Plains. It was rather a tearful start to her education, and I was hardput to leave her in the hands of the teachers. She soon settled down, but it wasn't many months into her first school year that we transferred her to Penrith Infants' school. That brought Jenny and Wendy together at the same school. They came home on the school bus to Derby Street, where they played together, either at Elkington's or Gardiner's.

Looking back after all the years, I am not positive why we transferred schools. It was probably due to two reasons – Wendy was not happy at Emu Plains, and, although I can't quite see the connection, Bet changed her job about the same time. In any case, Wendy became much happier at her new school.

After a couple of years at Kralco in Sydney, Bet landed a job at St Marys. She had studied the 'jobs vacant' column every Saturday in the Sydney Morning Herald. The job was as a bookkeeper to an accountant, Kevin Houseman, and was to last at least 10 years. Kevin was a Rotarian at St Mary's club and had helped me in providing contacts, mainly with the business people. When I missed the Penrith Rotary meeting, I mostly 'made up' at St Marys.

Cumberland's lack of interest in the St Marys Times, and the advertising salesman's habit of channelling advertisements to the supposed rival paper, Penrith Press, soon took its toll. The Times was closed down and I was transferred to the Fairfield Advance.

This was another paper which had figured in the virtual closure of another family newspaper, the Biz, owned by the Bright family. In similar fashion to the Colless family, the Bright family, father Bill and his two sons, had retained the printing business, building it up to the most flourishing printers in Fairfield area. However, in this case, it was not a real closure, but a purchase of sorts- a pseudo closure, if I may use that term. Cumberland kept publishing the Biz but restricted it to eight pages. The advertising salesmen used the same pattern of channelling clients to their parent paper, the Advance, setting precedence later – and continuing to be – used for the St Marys-Penrith Press arrangement. The Advance ranged from 24 to 36 pages, with the occasional special issue going to 40 or even 48 pages.

My transfer by Cumberland raised a family transport problem. I could no longer dash out for a quick trip to pick Wendy up, if need be, from an office half-an-hour away by car. For a while, I think we managed by me dropping Bet off at Penrith rail station for an unnecessarily early trip to St Marys, then dropping Wendy off at Eve's to catch Jenny's school bus. This arrangement soon became untenable, particularly for the reverse, evening schedule. Even with an assistant journalist, Jack Mitchell – junior in status, but more senior in talent – I was forced to work late at night to meet the weekly deadline (Jack Mitchell was later to become editor-in-chief of all Cumberland newspapers).

So, I set about getting additional transport for Bet. She was a very good driver and had driven all of our vehicles, even Dad's Silver Anniversary Buick, which wasn't an easy beast to handle. Indeed, her father had owned a similar model, in which Bet had gained her licence. I remembered an acquaintance of mine had a hobby of buying, repairing and reselling the small Volkswagen 'Beetles'. He had advertised them in the Nepean Times. From him, I bought one, which he recommended, assuring me it would last for years. Which it did.

Bet promptly named it 'Charlie'. She had a name for all our cars. Sadly, I can only remember another two 'Sam', the white Ford station wagon and my present tiny 'Toby'. Subsequently, Bet and Wendy travelled everywhere in Charlie, the three of them being inseparable. I think it was at this time that Bet decided she needed a refresher driving course. I suppose the need arose for her through having the future full responsibility of Wendy's safety. She need not have worried, although she did have one accident in Charlie, after dropping Wendy off at Eve's and proceeding to work at St Marys. She failed to give way to the right in Derby Street, coincidentally at Colless Street. (named for the Nepean Times family and right alongside the corner home of Syd Colless). The traffic policeman let her off with a caution. If the accident had happened a few years later, the woman driver of the other vehicle would have been at fault, because there are stop signs on all streets crossing the busier Derby Street.



Soon after I took over as senior journalist at Fairfield, Cumberland added another paper to my load; this was the Holroyd Broadcaster, based in Fairfield's neighbour suburb of Merrylands. This paper usually ran to eight pages.

So there I was, within a year, the virtually the editor of three free (over the fence throwaway) tabloid newspapers, a minimum of 40 pages, compared with the broadsheet Nepean Times of eight pages weekly, a paid-for paper. I still think I produced more, better quality news in the Times, which probably averaged 50 percent advertising, compared with Cumberland's policy of running 80 percent advertising.

Perhaps I should the term 'virtual editor'. At Cumberland, we senior editors at each of the 20 or so papers had to do the complete 'layout'. This comprised a full-scale 'dummy' paper in which the size and position of each advertisement was shown on each page. Quite often – more often than not, actually – this 'dummy' was subject to change, as more advertisements were accepted beyond the normal deadline. As virtual editors, we had to fill the spaces left by the ads with stories we had written, proof read, and cut to fit the respective 'holes' (spaces), write the headlines (normally a sub-editor's job) and get the finished product to the printer before the deadline. What we escaped having to do was to

accept responsibility if the paper was sued for defamation, etc. That onerous position was taken by the chief editor or even by the managing editor, who had labelled me 'the wild man from the bush', which I deemed a reference to my days at Penrith, or going further 'bush' to Warragamba, or even further to Wangaratta (now that was really bush to a city journo).

The two editors – chief and managing – didn't like being sued, so we virtual editors had to be wary of the legal dangers in our copy, an additional burden.

To meet our deadline of Tuesday 8am every week, Jack Mitchell and I worked past Monday midnight, Jack putting the finishing touches on the weekend sport and me the finishing touches on the front page, slotting in the sport and juggling the late changes to the dummy layout. Then I had to deliver the final copy to the back door printer's entrance of Cumberland head office in Parramatta, and Jack to his new bride in Dundas (he didn't drive a car), before heading off home to Emu Plains in the wee small hours. (Jack's wife, Jenny was years later to show her gratitude for Jack's safe return each week to the marital home in a coincidental chain of events. I was in Auburn District Hospital for a prostrate operation. During recovery, Jenny went out of her way to tell me that I was clear of cancer. She was a pathologist who had made the test, or knew very early of the test result.)

The Parramatta editorial hierarchy wanted me to turn the Biz into a pictorial revue of the week's news. This would lighten my workload to a degree, turning it over to the photographers; although I would have to dictate what photographs would be taken. Despite the Parramatta directive, one page I would not surrender to photographs. This was Page 2, on which appeared a column "Paragraphs about People". This column was written by Norm McLeod, who had an uncanny knack of gathering day-to-day gossip about people – births, deaths, marriages – a kind of "hatched, matched, and dispatched" tittle-tattle – and making it interesting to readers. Norm was employed by a blue metal quarry in Greystanes, and gathered his 'paragraphs' in the local pub at Smithfield, within a kilometre of his home, shades of Bob Loudon and many another journo's, who held court in the 'local'. Norm never made notes. I drank with him occasionally, watching him in action. He relied on his memory, apart from the occasional note written on his hand or forearm.

So, I kept "Paragraphs about People" in the Biz, on Page 2, mostly filling the entire editorial space, which was much greater than the 25 percent allowed in other Cumberland publications due to the lack of advertising interest organized by the salesmen. By retaining the column, I kept faith, to a small extent, with Bill Bright, the previous Biz owner, who had originally sponsored Norm. As will be seen some six or seven years down the track, keeping the faith with both Bill and Norm was fortuitous.



The major stories in two of the papers, the *Advance* and the *Broadcaster*, originated from local government. Hence, the meetings of Fairfield and Holroyd Councils became compulsory first-hand viewing. Politics became the dominating influence in Fairfield, whereas it was practically absent at Merrylands (Holroyd Council). Labor aldermen (councillors as they are called these days, when so many alderMEN are women) operated openly as party members, but Liberal Party members operated under the pseudonym of 'Independents'.

One notable upheaval in the balance of power came when the local government elections were held, as they were in September every third year. This year – it would have been late 60's or very early 70's – the result was a six-all draw (The four council areas, wards, each elected three aldermen). The mayor was elected from these 12 aldermen at the first meeting after the election. That was the method adopted in Fairfield. Some council areas adopted the other alternative method of having all eligible voters on the electoral roll (all ratepayers and permanent residents, etc) vote for the mayoral position from candidates who stood for that position as distinct from being only an alderman.

The six-all stalemate for this particular election was resolved by one Labor alderman switching allegiance to become an Independent, on the guarantee that all six other members of the Independent Coalition would vote for him as mayor. When the mayoral election meeting started, the turncoat was castigated by his abandoned fellows with one Labor alderman actually throwing thirty pieces of silver in his direction. Following his term of mayoral duty, he returned to his native England on a holiday visit, and faded from political life thereafter.



One Fairfield Labor alderman gave me a heap of trouble. He was John Newman, a native of one of the Balkan states – Yugoslavia, Bosnia, or most likely Croatia. Originally, his name was spelt Neumann. Newman was one of three aldermen representing Cabramatta, which was then on the verge of becoming the drug 'capital' of the nation, snatching that title from the notorious eastern Sydney suburb of Kings Cross.

My problem with Newman hinged on his never-ceasing self-promotion. He suffocated me with an endless procession of press releases, praising Labor's efforts generally, and his in particular. No edition of the Advance passed without him coming bounding up the stairs with yet another 'hot' news story. To give him his due, his press releases were all impeccably typed, even if they had to be heavily edited, should they ever be used.

Newman was a fitness fanatic, with a black belt in karate, so it was no exaggeration to say he came "bounding up the stairs". He never, in any way, indicated being upset if his handouts were not used. Indeed, he appeared to be unflappable, even the tragic death of his wife and child in a car accident did not seem to daunt him. At the next council meeting, which I think was held that same day, he appeared stony-faced, entering into all debates as if nothing had happened.

However, his insistence on providing such heavily biased copy became annoying. I was fully capable of finding true worth in Labor's achievements without his help. I was not alone in wishing him "gone". All other journalists in contact with him, regardless of what paper they represented, felt the same way. However annoying, his methods paid off, for he was elected Member of Parliament for Cabramatta in the State Parliament of New South Wales.

Apparently his methods continued to antagonize, because he became the first member of any Australian government, local, state or federal, to be assassinated. At the time of writing, he was not only the first, but the only parliamentary assassination. One of his Labor successors in local government, representing Cabramatta in Fairfield City Council, was charged, and eventually convicted of Newman's murder. His first trial was aborted on a technicality, but, after a long delay, his second trial resulted in a conviction. Various rumours had Newman involved in drug trades as part of his obvious wealth. Counter rumours maintained he was fighting that same drug trade, drawing the enmity of the dealers and the Mr. "Bigs" who controlled the dealers. Either rumour could be a motive his murder.

He was shot down as he was returning from a Cabramatta Labor Party meeting, which, ironically, was held in the Police Boys Club. The theory put forward by the police was that it was a drive-by shooting. His de-facto wife was a witness to the assassination, hearing a car accelerating to a high speed immediately after the shooting. The Newman murder happened long after my association with him. Actually, I had retired from all newspaper work, and was a relatively successful worm farmer.



When I first started at the Advance, Cabramatta was repeatedly termed the "centre of culture" in Fairfield municipality, particularly by one alderman in council's debates. Its fall from grace was directly due to a migrant hostel established by the federal government.

One of my feature stories in the Advance concerned an inspection tour of the hostel by a Fairfield mayor, whom I accompanied. The hostel was closed some five or six years after our visit and shifted to Villawood, bordering still on Fairfield. However, the closure came after a high proportion of the Vietnamese migrants had left the hostel, settling in a virtual "ghetto" surrounding the hostel area. It did not take long for some of the former migrants to form gangs pushing drugs. Thus, the "culture centre" of Fairfield became the "drug capital" of Australia.

One of the more satisfying outcomes, eventually, of my almost 10 years at the Advance, was a campaign aimed at getting a new hospital for Fairfield. The hospital board chairman, a fellow member of Fairfield Rotary Club, provided me with periodical "ammunition" for stories. (I had transferred my Rotary membership from Penrith to Fairfield after my appointment to the Advance).

I had left the Advance and had my own paper, the Western Press, before land was purchased at Wetherill Park for the new hospital. Eventually, the building replaced the "temporary" mix of pre-fabricated structures that had been Fairfield District Hospital for more than 20 years. The new all-brick permanent became my "temporary home", as a patient, when I had a slight stroke during the week of my 80th birthday.

But I am getting rather ahead of myself.

When reporting council stories, which, as I have mentioned before, made the most important headlines in our parochial papers, I usually quoted aldermen verbatim. I understood that the use of quotation marks added interest to the story. (Looking back on what I have written overall in these memoirs, I have not made similar use of quotation marks here).

Anyway, my use of quotation marks, and the angles I used, had a strange consequence in one story (by angles I mean most journalists twist their stories, either consciously or sub-consciously, towards their own political or philosophical leanings. In a lot of cases, the twisting is done at the behest or order of the paper's owner).

The edition with the story in question had hardly hit the street when a Labor alderman came rushing up the stairs, asking for me. When I appeared, he roundly abused me for the biased reporting against him, in person, and the Australian Labor Party, in general. He had hardly departed when I was again called to the front counter. This time it was a so-called Independent alderman. He actually was a Liberal Party M.L.C. (Member of the Legislative Council in State Parliament). Frank Calabro was his name. Frank chastised me for biased reporting in the same edition against him personally and against the Liberal Party in general.

As well as being called "the wild man from the bush" by the managing editor, Geoff Noaks, I earned the soubriquet of "the late Mr. Pellas" from the chief of staff, Frank Rowlings, due to my regular late delivery of late copy. Frank had a chequered career. He started in newspapers as a copy boy with the Sydney daily, the Daily Telegraph. The story goes that Frank had an altercation with the paper's owner-publisher, Sir Frank Packer in the building's lift. Sir Frank told him to pick up his wages from the cashier and he, Sir Frank, would see to it that he, copy boy Frank, would never work in newspapers in Australia ever again.

Fortunately for the copy boy, the founder of Cumberland Newspapers, before Rupert Murdoch's ownership was having a 'war' with the Telegraph. So the red-haired Frank Rowlings did get a job with a local newspaper and rose to be a chief-of-staff of 20 odd newspapers. Maybe the temper that Frank had to match his red hair had something to do, in the twilight of his career, with a shift to Bankstown Torch, as editor of a newspaper in opposition to Cumberland's Bankstown Observer. (On second thoughts – or possibly third, fourth or fifth thoughts – I think Cumberland's founder was an adventurous type journalist named Earl White).

Getting back to my life as a journalist, rather than that of Frank Rowlings, or Frank Packer, or Rupert Murdoch or even Earl White, I must relate the finale of my weekly routine, that we referred to as "putting the Advance to bed". To do this, I had to follow-up my late Monday night sitting with Jack Mitchell, by returning to the Parramatta printing works on Tuesday morning, a few hours after dropping off my last copy and the completed layout at the very same place. Putting the paper "to bed" involved a process we called "stone subbing". It meant sub-editing on the "stone", the metal tables where the pages were "made-up" ready for printing. Before the improved offset printing was introduced, this stone subbing involved reading the metal slugs upside down and back-to-front. Each slug represented one line of a story. The stone-hand making up the page stood on one side of the table, and the stone-subbing journalist stood opposite, on the other side of the table ("stone").

Offset printing was an entirely different process. The metal slugs were replaced by the stories appearing on sheets of plastic, just as they would appear in the finished paper. Cutting a story to fit the hole allocated for it involved literally cutting the plastic sheet to fit. The stone sub-editor still had to read upside down and back-to-front. Offset printing was introduced during the latter part of my 10 years at Cumberland. Fortunately, due to our late-night sub-editing at the Advance office the night before, stone-subbing at Parramatta printing works was kept to a minimum. However, I had to appear at the stone, because there was the odd line or even the odd paragraph too long, resulting in the metal slugs being thrown out.

We also had stand-by photographic blocks of various personalities, which could be used in association with the stories. Vigilance was needed to prevent the stone-hand using the wrong photo/story combination. Where possible, we wrote throwaway paragraphs at the end of each story. This tail-end part could be retained or deleted without spoiling the sense of the story. Cutting the stories to make them fit was made easier by this stratagem.

Cumberland produced more than 20 newspapers, which meant there could be four or five journo stone-subbing different papers on any one day. We all tried to finish work early on our papers, or delay finishing – in order to have a long lunch at "Annie's", the pub around the corner. We would be joined at the pub by all the editorial staff of the two Parramatta-based papers, the Advertiser and the Advocate. Mostly, there would be some heavy drinking started and games of darts played. I rarely drank much beer, I never liked the taste, and I found that I could match the others where a game of darts was concerned. Maybe I had just enough beer to relax me, whereas a lot of the others had too much!

Wednesday, publication day for the Advance, was a day, mostly, for continued relaxation. When the papers arrived on the doorstep, we scanned them for any mistakes I had failed to pick up. Then we awaited the arrival of the photographer, who came out from the head office at Parramatta to take photos for the following week's issue. Jack Mitchell had made a list of photo opportunities on Tuesday. I usually had one or two to add, particularly if I had attended a council meeting on the previous night, a few hours after Jack had made his list. Council met every second Tuesday. On the off week, we would sometimes be hard put for stories, let alone photos.

The photo schedule was carefully timed to allow us a couple of hours for a long lunch, the second such session in succession. We invariably went to Fairfield RSL Club, here we invaded the billiard room and proceeded to play snooker. Beginners luck, as with darts, kept me in the game. One of the photographers, Bruce Loney, was to end up, many years later, succeeding Jack Mitchell, as editor-in-chief of all Cumberland newspapers. Another of the photographers was Dave Hodges, who I was able to help organize a kindergarten, when, much later, I had my own paper, but that, too, was well in the future.

One feature that is sadly missing in all newspapers, so far as I know, is the *full* reporting of agricultural and horticultural shows. I use the italics "full" to differentiate between the news reports of today and yesteryear. When reporting the shows at Penrith and Luddenham, to use two examples, for the Nepean Times, I went to great lengths to arrange with the show secretaries for copies of all the results to be provided for publication. I well remember the

Penrith secretary, a Mr Lawler, harassed as he was at the time, cheerfully handing over long lists detailing who baked the best scones, who bred the best bull, etc.

When Cumberland transferred me to Fairfield, I tried to carry the tradition forward to the Advance. I well remember taking Wendy and Jenny to the Fairfield show when they were about 10 years old, putting them on the donkey cart ride, letting them find other rides and entertainment, while I gained stories from the pigeon show within a show, or who won the wood chop, or baked the best cake. Those days are gone forever, on two counts; no such details are printed, in full today; and who would let two 10 year old girls – or boys for that matter – wander alone in a show crowd in today's environment. Needless to say, I was probably one of the last to bother about gathering such specific details, and one of the last to publish them for the reading public.

Through my association with the Broadcaster, I was able to help publicize Dunrossil School for Handicapped children. The Mayor of Holroyd, Alderman Bob Devlin, had a child attending that school. As with so many acquaintances, I had forgotten his name until this very moment, but eventually he became one of my client advertisers when I started my own paper. He was part owner of Holroyd Hardware and Timber. Through his influence, Merrylands (the heart of Holroyd council area) hosted the first paraplegic games, long before the Paralympics were ever established.

It was through my association with the Broadcaster, too, that I eventually broke with Cumberland Newspapers.



The advertising salesman solely responsible for the Broadcaster, Bob Reupach, worked from the Advance office. The Broadcaster only ran to eight pages, sometimes 12, rarely 16 pages. Bob was never troubled in meeting the advertising-to-editorial ratio. The ratio for larger papers, like the Advance, was a minimum of two-to-one; in other words, 66% advertising, 33% editorial. In reality, this regularly proved to be proportionally higher: up to four-to-one, or 80% advertising to 20% editorial.

The minimum was relaxed for the smaller papers, down to one-to-one, or 50% each advertising and editorial content. Often, this included unsolicited, unpaid (fill) advertisements. Therefore, Bob had a lot of spare time on his hands and was dissatisfied with his job. Bob decided to start up his own newspaper in St Marys, called the St Marys Star. With a sister paper, the Penrith Star, this is still published today. Bob offered the editorial writing of the Star to me. If I remember rightly, the pay was \$50 cash-in-hand. That was worthwhile in those days, 30 years ago, for what was virtually one day's work (Saturday) each week. It was less than what I had to drop when I left the Nepean Times for Cumberland, and I was feeling the pinch, money-wise.

Inevitably, Cumberland got to hear of my "moon-lighting" job. The then editor-in-chief (John Allison was his name) tackled me with it, demanding I drop writing for the Star. I countered this by requesting promotion from B Grade to A grade journalist. This would have given me approximately the same salary as I was earning from the two jobs in combination-Cumberland and the Star. I knew that, if Cumberland sacked me, I had enough length of service to gain payment for long service leave. Having checked with the Australian Journalists' Association secretary, I had about \$1000 coming to me. Under the terms of my employment, I would have to be sacked for that to happen. If I resigned, I would lose it.

Cumberland refused to up-grade me, so I stood firm with my moonlight job for the Star. I was eventually sacked and received \$1000 long service leave pay.

chapter twenty nine – Taking on Rupert

Leading up to the climax of my sacking, I had been turning over in my mind the possibility of doing a “Bob Reupach”. I considered that if Bob Reupach, an advertising man, could start up a newspaper, I, an editorial man, could do likewise.

I had innumerable contacts in local government, sporting circles, women's organizations, and commercial life. This latter category was enhanced by my membership in Rotary. Bet supported my plans and ambition to be a newspaper proprietor. Her experience with the Nepean Times, plus her adaptability to new ventures, was to prove invaluable.

I drew up a “dummy” eight pages, tabloid size, and proceeded to hawk it around. I was selling the advertising space at reasonable rates, well below the rates of my major competitor, the erstwhile Advance. My advertising space was also virtually on a par of the minor, not to be feared, Liverpool Champion, circulating in Cabramatta, on the border of my proposed territory. My intended circulation area covered the western sections of Fairfield and Holroyd (Merrylands) local government areas.

When I could see that it was a viable proposition, I started hunting around for a printer. Firstly, I tried Bob's printer, who published the Hills District News. I had, through stone-sub-editing the Star, previous experience with this “publishing house”. It was housed in an oversized suburban household garage. However, this association with the establishment by eventually stood for naught.

The publisher was a thorough “gentleman and scholar”, as the saying goes. He was personally covering and writing all editorial, selling and composing all the advertising, as well as overseeing the printing for the Hills News. He seriously considered my project, but he just could not fit another paper into his schedule. He was very sympathetic to my plans to print a similar paper to his Hills News. As the end result of our discussions, he recommended Bushell Press, at Silverwater,

The proprietor, Bill Bushell, was a vastly different type to the Hills News “gentleman and scholar”. Bushell did have the appearance of an academic, white-bearded, with a confident demeanour. He did print a small newspaper of his own, the “News”, which was mostly lifted from trade papers, and was mostly rubbish. In retrospect, I think he probably printed it so he could call himself a newspaper owner. His business, obviously, was that of a job printer.

However, Bill Bushell agreed to print my newspaper.

I had chosen the name "Western Press". It had a nice ring to it, as representing the western suburbs, more precisely Fairfield and Merrylands, not of Sydney. This caused me no end of trouble. There already existed a "Western Press", catering for the western area of New South Wales, based in the city of Dubbo. There was a long drawn out battle of words (fortunately not a legal battle) but, with the help of Bushell, I prevailed and the name "Western Press" was duly registered as a suburban "free" press.

Maybe, I would have saved myself a lot of trouble had I followed the guide of the Hills News owner, who derived the name from the fact that his paper circulated in such suburbs as Castle Hill, Pendle Hill, Baulkham Hills, Pennant Hill. The thought came to me only last night – 30 odd years too late – that I could have called my paper the Parks Press, or something similar. Although the majority of my circulation area was Smithfield, most of the other areas were Parks; Wetherill Park, Bossley Park, Horsley Park, St Johns Park and Edensor Park. That way, I could have saved myself of the criticism that this upstart, Pellas, was trying to pit himself against the "establishment" of Western New South Wales.

Contrary to that criticism, I heard through the journalistic grapevine, that the AJA secretary, Gordon Coleman, was vastly intrigued and amused when I went to press. He realized that the \$1000, which he helped me to get, had been put to good use. I was to find out later that the newspaper world in general shared Coleman's thoughts. It became a nine-day wonder that someone who was sacked by Cumberland should start up in opposition to the giant of the suburban newspaper world.



Starting the Western Press in 1970 caused a domestic upheaval. We could not very well continue to live in Emu Plains, as I had to work long hours in the western area of Fairfield. Apart from the long hours, it was bad policy not to live in the area. We found a house to rent in Horsley Drive, Smithfield. Wendy was 10 years old and had to change schools. It was probably as big a wrench for her as starting school in the first place. Then, she had to start without knowing anyone in the school. This time, she had to leave her best friend, Jenny Gardiner. Fortunately, I knew the principal of Smithfield Primary School, Bruce Ada, through attending Smithfield RSL meetings and publicizing school fetes, etc. He introduced Wendy to one of her classmates and she soon settled in.

At about the same time as I was starting the Western Press, Smithfield Rotary Club was being formed. I soon transferred my Rotary membership from Fairfield to the newly formed Smithfield club. This proved beneficial in some respects and disastrous in others. Most of the club members came from the industrial area of Smithfield, either owners or managers of their businesses. There was a large turnover in their workforces. Consequently, they were repeatedly advertising for workers in the "jobs vacant" columns of newspapers. Preferring local residents, if possible, they advertised in the local paper, the Western Press.

The downside of their membership was a lack of the true meaning of Rotary. The most loudmouthed, forceful minority regarded community welfare as a matter of dollars only. Instead of helping the community with their hands-on experience, they simply threw money at the problem. To give them their due, it was mostly their own money...at first. However, a few of us came up with a money-spinner fund-raiser. One of the members, Mick Pangallo, had married into the fireworks manufacturing Foti family (The Foti Company now provides the fireworks for the world-famous Sydney Harbor New Years Eve celebrations). Sale of fireworks had just been banned due to a spate of injuries suffered in private home bonfires usually celebrated on the Queen's Birthday holiday held each year on the first weekend in June.

We came up with the idea of a public fireworks night, complete with sideshows, stalls selling hot dogs, pies, ice-cream, hot and cold drinks, etc. Foti's, of course, supplied the fireworks, helping them in a small way, perhaps, to make up some of their losses caused by the retail ban. Having taken on the job of publicity, I had pamphlets printed, which I delivered personally in bundles to each school in the area. The project was held on the Queen's Birthday weekend, to follow tradition. Coming close to her own birthday, June 9, Wendy appeared to thoroughly enjoy the night. With her close school friend, Jenny, she manned the ice-cream stall. Bet joined with other members' wives in selling sandwiches and hot dogs.

The fireworks raised a lot of funds during three or four years, after which the project gradually fizzed out, like a big cracker with a faulty fuse. (Dare I say it, myself, due to a lack of publicity when I dropped out of the club). However, the influx of thousands of dollars from the fireworks led to the minority (a majority on the club's board of management) throwing club funds at community projects as the sole mindless contributions.

While on the subject of Smithfield Rotary Club, some of the members regarded it as a mini-Liberal Party branch or as a mini-Masonic Lodge. I was on the outer on both counts. My politics were small-"I" liberal, tending towards capital-"L" Labor. Even though I joined the Masons about the time of my marriage to Melva, I had been unable to keep up financial membership following our separation.

As Smithfield Rotary Club secretary for two consecutive years, I was able to bring about some simplification of ordering literature from Rotary International headquarters in America. Having read the correspondence, my successor as secretary expressed amazement at my temerity in approaching RI in this regard. At the behest of several members, I stood for president during my years as public relations officer for Fairfield City Council. (I am getting a bit ahead of myself at this point. The PRO job came after the Western Press ceased publication, but I want to get the Rotary story completed).

My candidature for president was beaten narrowly by a determined opponent, who campaigned, unbeknownst by me at the time, on my close association with the Mayor of Fairfield, Janice Crosio. He quietly – almost clandestinely – set about getting the number of votes to beat me by the narrowest of margins. Needless to say, he was of differing political persuasions to myself and the mayor, and was a true-blue Mason, as I was not. My opponent was flabbergasted later when I sponsored a Liberal mayor, Warren Colless, as a new club member. To completely confound him, Warren was a Grand Lodge past inspector of Workings.

I was eventually elected president at a later election, but I could not see myself meeting the financial obligations. My health, too, was faltering through my dysentery problem, so I resigned, after more than 15 years as a Rotarian, having reached the designation of "senior active". Warren was elected to fill my place as president. Smithfield Rotary Club has since ceased to exist. Apparently, the club had been operating for some time below the minimum number of members. It had, too, gained a notorious reputation for drunken behaviour. Warren had seen the "writing on the wall", and had transferred his membership to Cabramatta club.



Fortunately, the gathering of news did not present any serious problem, although I had to spend considerable time chasing up advertisements, a new experience in my life. I continued to attend council meetings, the previous source of most of my news. In addition, the State Government was committing shoddy deals in my circulation area. For example, development restrictions set up by previous governments were cancelled if you were friendly with the powers-that-be in the new Liberal State Government. The restrictions had been applied to form a "green belt" communications corridor, allowing for electricity transmission lines, future railway lines, road development, etc. This virtual corruption was mainly at the behest of the Premier, Mr Askin, and one of his ministers, Mr Morton. The

corridor, still in existence, runs north and south, with boundaries where we were living at Horsley Park, between Cowpasture and Walgrove Roads. Examples of the uses resulting from this planning are Eastern Creek Speedway and the Western Orbital Tollway, which provides a fast traffic route around, rather than through, Sydney.

The Askin-Morton corruption, now recognized as being widespread throughout Sydney, was, in our area, based on glaring exemptions from corridor regulations. One such exemption drew boundaries around a business owned by a prominent local Liberal Party member. I was given other examples of development applications – one in a flood prone area – mostly industrial projects, being exempted at a price. However, I did not run with these stories, as I did not have proof, although my source was very reliable.

There were plenty of other good stories to report. They included the planning of a large shopping complex, the new Fairfield District Hospital nearby, the upgrading of Smithfield Post Office, all within my circulation area. As mentioned previously, the story about the hospital was the culmination of a campaign I had helped to wage during my time at the Advance. The planning for the new hospital was dear to my heart. I had for so long joined in the fight to have the old pew-fabricated hospital replaced.

We had to shift house from Horsley Drive to another rented house in Moir Street, Smithfield. This was within 200 metres of the house we were leaving, Moir Street being the next street parallel to and to the north of Horsley Drive. Before we moved, I had a special narrow table – more of a bench – made by a cabinet-maker to fit into an awkward space in my small office. The cabinet-maker was an advertiser who had run up a large bill with us, which he was having difficulty in meeting. I arranged with him to provide the table in lieu of payment. That table has been a constant companion to me through four shifts of residence since then. As I write this (January 2006), it is the major equipment in my corner den – or should I say pen, as in penitentiary – during my rehabilitation from a hip replacement.

Let me point out, at this stage, I have never been in a position to own my own home since 1952 at Croydon, Victoria. It was about the time of the Western Press period that I approached a solicitor with a view of having my maintenance payments to Melva cancelled. The solicitor, former Rotarian colleague Dick Quilty, quoted my lack of possible home ownership as one of the financial hardships I endured through the payment of maintenance. Fortunately, Quilty's application on my behalf was successful and I was no longer obligated to pay the maintenance.

By the time I had finished selling advertising each week, not to mention administrative affairs such as printing and distribution, Saturday and (mostly) Sunday were the only days for formulating copy. So I worked flat out at the typewriter and rarely finished before 3am on Monday morning. Bushell required my copy to be delivered by the start of work at 7.30 am on Monday. By this time I was mentally exhausted and had to prepare myself for a weekly 9am appointment with the current Rotary president, whose name escapes me. So, Bet, bless her heart and my memory of her, woke up in the small hours of the morning after I had finished the copy and drove all the way from Smithfield to deliver the Western Press copy to Bushell's. She had to be back in time to wake Wendy and get her off to school. Bear in mind we did not have mobile phones in those days – not that Bet ever owned one – so it was a very brave drive on Bet's part, considering the time of the day.

My meeting with the Rotary president was to enable him to call, on his way to his office, with his contribution – the president's message – for our Rotary club bulletin. As the bulletin editor at the time, I then had to cobble together the rest of the bulletin. It was my job to get the bulletin copy to the secretarial agency at Cabramatta by mid-afternoon Monday. On my way home from stone-subbing the Western Press on Tuesday, I would pick up the printed bulletins ready for the Rotary dinner that evening.

Occasionally, when Bushell had finished printing early, I would deliver some of the Western Press to delivery boys before I picked up the bulletins. Otherwise, mostly, I would leave the

papers with the paper-boys at their homes for delivery after school on Wednesdays. That enabled me to keep faith with my publishing dateline of Wednesday each week.

As a sidelight on my hectic weekends, we had a visit from my sister, Betty, her husband, Doug Vanstan, and family. They were in Sydney for the marriage of their eldest son, Rodney. For some reason, Bet and I agreed to provide a bed for Louise, one of the daughters of similar age to Wendy. Well ... the two young ones proceeded to talk the night away. I told them to keep quiet, in no gentle terms, three or four times, without any effect. It must have been too much for Wendy to have a cousin, at last, to talk to. She was – and is – a great one for “family”. It must have been a Friday or Saturday, otherwise it would have been me keeping them awake with my typewriter noise.

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One of my success stories concerned a Smithfield woman who with her husband, ran a sandwich shop, catering for the burgeoning local industrial area. She retired in 2005 as a Federal Member of Parliament, and as a parliamentary secretary. Her name is Janice Crosio.

I was involved right from the start of her rise through every form of government, from Local to State and finally Federal. Janice and two fellow Smithfield ALP branch members made an appointment to see me. The branch intended to nominate Janice to contest the forthcoming local government election for Fairfield Municipal Council. (The time was some years before Fairfield became a city).

I agreed to support her nomination. We started immediately with an on-the-spot interview. During the course of that interview I discovered her swimming prowess; she had been a State-wide school champion. The questioning then led to the development of their lunch business, catering for the rapidly growing industrial nature of Smithfield,

As a result of my editorial support – in part at least – Janice was elected to council with a strong vote. Shortly afterwards, I reaped a reward for my efforts. I was made a Justice of the Peace, through the representations of the Deputy Premier, Jack Ferguson. I was persuaded to accept the appointment by Norm McLeod, of “Paragraphs about People” fame. There is no doubt, in my mind, that the appointment was strongly supported, if not initiated, by Janice and/or her Smithfield ALP branch colleagues. I am still able to act as a JP at 86 years of age. It is a lifetime appointment.

My association with Janice became closer when I became Fairfield Council's first public relations officer. While holding that office, Janice became the first woman to be elected Mayor of Fairfield. She followed that achievement by being elected to New South Wales State Government. During that service, she became a minister in the Labor Government. If memory serves me rightly, she became Minister for Water Resources and later Minister for Local Government.

Riding the strong wave of local support, Janice stood for the Federal seat of Prospect, based in the Fairfield area. She won it convincingly. The next step was to become a parliamentary secretary. Janice did not contest the 2004 Federal election, retiring from representative politics, but I guess she is still active behind the scenes. We still exchange Christmas cards.

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The beginning of the end of Western Press came through warnings by accountant Kevin Houseman. Bet formerly worked for him as bookkeeper-typist and he acted as our accountant.

The problem arose through a multitude of bad debts. They were not very large individually or on a normal business scale. The worst offenders were the regular classified advertisers,

who let their small weekly indebtedness mount up alarmingly. A major part of the problem was caused by being under-capitalized. I was, in effect, running without any margin. Lack of salesmanship was another important factor. I just could not crack the full-page advertisement, such as those supplied by super-markets. I did try employing an advertising salesman, but he was too inexperienced.

It did not help when one of my schoolboy paper deliverers dumped a bundle of Western Press under a road bridge. Cumberland got to hear of it and magnified the incident to blame all my paperboys. Cumberland advertising salesmen were not backward in coming forward with bad stories to my advertisers.

I started to get behind with my payments to Bushell. A different accountant advised me to appeal to Dr Klugman, Janice Crosio's predecessor as Federal Member for Prospect, with a view to gaining financial help from the Australian Labor Party in return for the help I had given Janice. Klugman was no help at all.

Eventually, I had to close down the Western Press. It had been a wonderful two years of experience. I was sorry to lose my own paper, but I had no lasting regrets.



Bet went back to the accountant, Kevin Houseman, travelling daily between Smithfield and St. Marys in her trusty steed, Charlie the VW Beetle. Bet had found a lady to care for Wendy after school. Her name was Penny McFarlane, mother of five children, the eldest daughter being about Wendy's age. They lived on the corner of Moir and Bourke Streets, about 100 metres from our home in Moir Street. Penny's husband worked for Qantas, as an engineer maintaining the jet engines. The two families became close friends, but sadly we drifted apart when Don retired. They sold the Moir Street house and bought a home on or near the Hawkesbury River in the Wilberforce region. Don, I thought, felt a bit lost in retirement. He asked me a lot of questions about fishing, but I did not follow up on his apparent need for a fishing companion.

Bushell tried to take over the masthead of the Western Press. Goodness knows where he was going to distribute such a paper. However, I came to an arrangement with him, fully supported by Bet, whereby I could pay off my indebtedness. I still have the masthead.

chapter thirty – The Champion

Upon learning I had closed the Western Press, the proprietor of the Burwood “free” paper wanted me to work for him. That was a bit too far out of my area of interest. Liverpool was closer and I landed a job with the Liverpool Champion.

It was owned by a member of the Fairfax family, of Sydney Morning Herald fame, who managed the Fairfax suburban newspaper group. This group now owns the paper started by Bob Reupach, the St Marys Star, and its sister paper the Penrith Star, which was started by Fairfax after taking over the St. Marys paper.

The Champion head office was based at Hurstville, a southern Sydney suburb, rather than a western suburb like Liverpool. The editor-in-chief, Ken Hargreaves, wanted me directly under his wing for a short period so I could pick up the Fairfax group “style”. So, for a start, I had to travel more than 40 km from Smithfield to Hurstville and return daily.

Each newspaper has a “style” of its own. Major groups, like the metropolitan dailies and Cumberland produce booklets of “style” to guide journalists. As an example of style, some papers retain the “u” in such words as “neighbour” and “labour”, while others, including this computer, favour “neighbor”, “labor” and, “favor”. Some managing editors prefer a person’s name be used before the title: “Mr. Howard, the Prime Minister”. Others use the opposite style: “the Prime Minister, Mr. Howard”.

Most papers now only capitalize the titles of royalty and heads of government, as a general rule. So a minister of religion is referred to as “the minister, the Rev, John Smith”. The principal of a school would be “the principal, Ms. Jane Smith”, much to the chagrin of some school teachers I know. (This computer wants me to use school teacher as one word, whereas I prefer splitting the two words).

Of course, there are exceptions to these basic rules, as I have described them, but you would have to obtain a stylebook (one word, the computer stipulates) to follow the complexities of style (I would dearly like to get my hands on the stylebook used in programming this computer). When writing numbers, the general rule among the majority of newspapers is to spell out the numbers one to ten; all higher numbers are written as actual figures, as in 11, 15, 136, 17,563` etc.



Having been thoroughly vetted during a few weeks, I started at Liverpool, with George Furby as the senior journalist. George was fond of quoting that he had worked for the Fijian newspaper that hit the street earlier than any other in the world each day. The Fijian paper's publishing time was one minute past midnight each day. With Fiji being on the international dateline, that made it impossible for any other paper to be published before it on any given day.

After a few months, George moved on to pastures anew and I became the senior journalist and, for a short time, the only journalist. The senior journalist, as at Cumberland, was virtually the editor. However, Ken Hargreaves was more of a hands-on editor-in-chief. He mostly checked the front page layout and stories before they were sent to the printer at Campbelltown – mostly, but not always.

As for the majority of suburban newspapers, local government proved the best source of the best stories each week. Liverpool City Council was notorious for being under the influence of land and housing developers. At council meetings, one alderman in particular turned towards the gallery for guidance when about to vote. Developers behind him in the gallery gave him the nod or the shake of the head.

I had a running battle with a would-be journalist by the name of Saddler. He wrote the Rugby League football stories for the opposition, the Liverpool Leader. He was an office-bearer of the Liverpool Leagues Club, and was involved in alleged shady business of the club. When the high school exams were finished for the year, a girl student at Lurnea School came to see me, with a view to becoming a journalist. Her name was Sonia Smirnow. Her references were excellent. I recommended her to the editor-in-chief for a job as a cadet journalist. Ken approved my recommendation and Sonia had a job within a week of leaving school. Sonia was eternally grateful and proved good at her job. The last time I talked with her, by telephone, she was publicity officer for the prestigious Sydney Regent Hotel.

The Champion had difficulty in obtaining a reliable distributor of the paper to local residents. As publication day was a quiet one in the editorial office, I took the job on, changing my editorial cap for that of a glorified paperboy. I had purchased a brand new white Ford XW station wagon during the heyday of the Western Press. One of my former paperboys was pleased to act as my offside. We took both front doors off the wagon, relying on seat belts to keep us safe. Then we drove around Liverpool streets, throwing the free papers to each side into front gardens of the houses. Residents were not charged for so-called free papers: advertising paid for printing, etc, including free distribution. The extra money I earned as distributing agent helped keep a roof over our heads. Needless to say, the wagon's front doors were replaced immediately after our paper throwing was completed.

Part of any editor's job is keeping tabs on other newspapers in the area. I regularly perused such papers as the Liverpool Leader and my old alma mater, of sorts, the Fairfield Advance. In one issue of the Advance, I saw an advertisement in the "positions vacant" column for a public relations officer needed at Fairfield Council. It was not really a "position vacant" because there had never been such a position. In the same week's Saturday edition of the Sydney Morning Herald, I saw a vacancy for a public relations officer at Sydney Water Supply. I could not face travelling to Sydney each day, so I only applied for the Fairfield Council job. Unbeknown to me, the editor of the Liverpool Leader opposition, Alan Cleaver, applied for both jobs. He got the Sydney Water job; I got Fairfield Council. The Sydney job was better paid, so that was why Alan accepted it. I have often wondered who would have got the Fairfield job if it had been a straight out contest between the two of us. I still fancy I would have succeeded, because of my contact with Janice and the ruling Labor majority then in power at Fairfield.

Actually, I possibly would have stood a good chance for the Sydney Water job through my Warragamba Dam contacts with the water media research for the Nepean Times stories on the dam.

chapter thirty one – public relations

Like most journalists, I had always looked down on work of public relations officers. Their jobs were always aimed at putting their employers in the best light. This often produced a conflict of interest to the best rules and principles of our journalistic profession.

However, the salaries were much better in proportion and contrast to those of comparative journalists. Into the bargain, superannuation came with the Fairfield job, at a time when it was not the everyday occurrence that it is today.

On the other hand, Fairfield Council had a bad reputation, which it was my job to counteract. It became an almost impossible job with the growing drug problem in the Cabramatta area of the municipality. Years later, after my retirement to the gentler occupation of worm farmer, I was asked what I did in my former life. On being told: "public relations officer for Fairfield," the inquirer came back with: "that would be a full time job...an essential job...an impossible job."

Being the first to hold that position, I had to make the rules, within the confines of local government regulations. This was made more difficult by the deputy town clerk, Ernie Douglas. If ever anyone earned their nickname, it was Ernie "Black" Douglas. He had no concept of the basics of journalism and, consequently, my need to cater for the whims and requirements of the media. To make matters worse, he had obviously wanted a favourite of his on the existing staff to be handed the job – my job – on a plate. He proceeded to make my life hell.

As part of my job, I made it a rule to talk to the mayor, Don Turtle at the time of my appointment, after hours. In any case, the mayor quite often wanted to dictate letters or discuss policy and future plans with me in the quieter after-business time. This did not sit well with Ernie. Also after hours, I made myself available to the press. This, too, went down like a lead balloon with the deputy town clerk.

Poor old Ernie, life was destined to pass him by. The story goes that when the municipalities of Fairfield and Cabramatta were joined to form the greater Fairfield Municipal Council – more recently Fairfield City Council – Ernie, as the original Fairfield town clerk, had the chance to retain his status. However, although Fairfield won the choice to retain the name of the council, the choice of town clerk went to Cabramatta. So the town clerk of

Cabramatta, Vic Winton, became the town clerk of the new, larger, Fairfield Municipal Council. (Town clerks are now called general managers).

Ernie Douglas was left with a permanent scowl and chip on his shoulder. No member of the public, as far as Ernie was concerned, was allowed in the council building before 8.30am and after 4.30pm. This included members of the press. The only exceptions, in his mind, were those invited by the mayor and those attending the public council meetings in the council chambers.

One of my major tasks, as planned for me by councillors was to organize a Festival of Nations. That, too, was an extra cross for Ernie to bear. Years before, a Festival of Nations was held under a council controlled by so-called Independent aldermen. They were mostly members of the Liberal Party, including the mayor at the time, Frank Calabro, who later spent at least six years as a member of the Legislative Council, the State Government Upper House. For some reason, Ernie apparently thought Frank Calabro held copyright to the name "Festival of Nations" – it was not fair for a Labor controlled council to use it. There were some 47 or 48 nations represented in Fairfield's multi-cultural population. Therefore "Festival of Nations" was an appropriate name, who-ever used it.

Under the presidency of Mayor Don Turtle, I became secretary and organizer of the festival. The festival program included:

- A parade of ethnic based floats, carrying people dressed in the colourful costumes of their previous nationalities.

- Ethnic based dancing in the streets.

- A naturalization ceremony

- An art show, with prizes for various categories of paintings.

- A beauty quest to determine Miss Festival of Nations and Miss Charity Queen.

To restrain the most volatile nations, a rule was passed prohibiting the use of national flags, limiting marchers, floats, dancers, etc, to the display of the Australian flag.

The Croatians were the only performers to ignore this rule. They caused the only nasty incident of the festival. The Serbian group was one of a number of nations represented in an exhibition of national dancing on a stage erected in a Cabramatta street. The Croatians, carrying their national flag, timed a military-style marching assault to coincide with the Serbs taking to the stage. I kept running towards the "assaulting" troops, pleading with them to "back off", which they eventually did, but not before they had made the point of their obvious enmity to the Serbs.

Finland was represented by New Australians living in Canley Vale. Some 20 years after the event, my blind grandson Brent Franklin, known to me as "the Champ", was riding in a taxi in Melbourne. In his extrovert way, he started talking to the driver, who said he was from Finland and more recently from Sydney. Asked if he knew, by chance, Tas Pellas, he said: "I know Tas Pellas from the Festival of Nations in Fairfield".

I may have mentioned this previously, my name for Brent as "the Champ" stems from two aspects: He was so adventurous in tackling anything that a sighted person would possibly flinch at and his name for me being "Gramps", which in rhyming return initiated "Champ".

The art show of the festival was judged by an outstanding Sydney artist Lloyd Rees. It was my job to entertain him in the lead up to the judging, so I took him to dinner. (More frowns from Ernie Douglas!!!) That had another sequel similar to the Finnish taxi driver.

When flying home from the Brisbane funeral of my sister Shirley, again many years after the festival, I was seated alongside a woman reading a book. I thought I saw a photo of Lloyd Rees on one of the pages.

- "Is that Lloyd Rees?" I asked.

- "It certainly is," my co-passenger replied.

- "I took him to dinner one day".

Then I told her all about the festival art show in Fairfield. She was from the North Shore of Sydney, and perhaps wondered that Fairfield, in the western suburbs, could boast of such an event as an art show. However, she gave no such inkling of any such thought.

(When I reached this stage in my original hand-written draft, during March, 2001, my dear wife Betty was taken ill. She was in and out of hospital for seven months leading up to her death on October 19 of that year. During those months and a month more, I did not write any of these memoirs. On renewing writing in November, I summarized her illness from diary entries, but I will omit that summary now until it fits chronologically into the ongoing pattern of my life).

Fairfield Festival of Nations, of which I was secretary and virtual manager, raised approximately \$10,000. The major amount of that profit was earned through the Miss Festival of Nations and Miss Charity Queen Contest.

As a typical example of the interest that the beauty contest engendered, I was invited to the home of one contestant. The family arrived from Chile within the last two years. As I was given cups of tea, they used their broken English to express their appreciation for the chance to enter their daughter in the quest. She was indeed very beautiful, but did not win either section – beauty or charity – of the competition.

The winners were announced at a ball held in Fairfield RSL Club, as its contribution to the festival. An announcement was made, also at the ball, that the proceeds would be donated to Fairfield Community Aid Service, which, among other charitable works, ran the meals-on-wheels service. Bet used to do the typing for the aid service, in an honorary capacity, and I was one of the voluntary drivers who delivered meals-on-wheels for a short period.

My close connection with Janice Crosio was renewed when she was promoted to be the Mayor of Fairfield by the next mayoral election. In Fairfield, a mayoral election was held every year.

Ultimately, this change of mayor led to Wendy making her debut. I never hear of girls making their debut these days – I suppose they do, but it never makes the local news pages. Or I never read the local newspapers enough to notice. At any rate, Janice was keen to revive the mayoral ball. It became part of my duties to organize the ball, which was held in the Marconi Club, in the Fairfield suburb of Bossley Park. I was greatly assisted in my arrangements by my assistant, Kay, who attended to most of the detail work, such as issuing invitations, seating, ticket selling, etc.

One of my important tasks was to write to Prime Minister Gough Whitlam inviting him, on Janice's behalf, to be the guest of honour. Gough was the Member for Werriwa, which covered the Cabramatta-Canley Vale area of Fairfield. Gough accepted the invitation and, as guest of honour, became the person to whom the debutantes were presented. Wendy was full of nerves as she was presented to the Prime Minister of Australia, but carried it off well.

I was public relations officer during the reign of four mayors: Don Turtle, Janice Crosio, Ernie Loveday, and Warren Colless.

I don't think I have mentioned another incident involving Janice Crosio and the Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam. It was during the time immediately before the infamous "Dismissal".

Gough was in deep trouble, with his government financially embarrassed. It had been recently involved in a scandalous international loan controversy. The Leader of the Opposition, Malcolm Fraser, was threatening to withhold "Supply", thus putting the government in a position of being unable to pay public servants. The Opposition could do

this, because it held the balance of power in the Senate. Fraser had coupled his threat with an ultimatum of forcing a Federal Government election.

Thus the government was in turmoil, with the Prime Minister in a no-win situation, when Janice invited me to meet Gough for afternoon tea at the main Fairfield library named in his honour. I was never sure why I made a threesome at the meeting, was my presence required as a chaperone for Janice or was my wisdom sought as to how Gough was to face the debacle confronting him? Before I'm accused as big-noting myself, Janice – and her predecessor, Don Turtle – were in the habit of bouncing project ideas off me. An example of this was a proposal to allow the development of a mini-car racetrack near Fairfield High School. I vetoed it.

Anyway, there we were – Gough, Janice and I, at afternoon tea at Gough Whitlam Library. The conversation was mainly confined to Gough and Janice. Perhaps I was a bit in awe of the situation, but, too, I did not think it was my place to give advice to the Prime Minister. Also, I did not think I had sufficient knowledge of the problem, even if I was brave enough to do so.



Of the four mayors I served under, the last, Warren Colless, was, in the end, to become the friendliest. Janice and I were friends way back before she became mayor, the friendship with Warren took some time to develop. It started, really, on a night trip to Bankstown City Council chambers. We were travelling in my car, for some reason, to a meeting at which, I think, my presence was not really required. On the way there, we were talking about generalities, when I asked Warren if he had given any thought about joining Rotary International. He replied that he had vaguely thought about joining the Lions Club, but had not given any thought about Rotary.

We did not pursue the subject at that moment, but I suggested at the next Rotary club board meeting that I would sponsor Warren as a future member of the club. The idea was met with unanimous approval – and a degree of amazement, though unexpressed, that I had snared such a worthy nominee and a Grand Lodge worshipful brother to boot.

After talking it over with his wife, Bev, Warren accepted my final invitation for him to become a Rotarian. Three club members, myself and Bob Stein included, visited Warren's home and interviewed him and Bev, explaining just what it meant to be a Rotarian. Bev appeared ecstatic at the prospect, and so she should have, because within a short time, Rotary-wise, she was touring Scotland with Warren on Rotary international exchange student business.

Warren proved a good friend. The friendship continued long after our association through council and Rotary. He was a member of the Sydney Cricket Ground and invited me to numerous Test and international one-day matches. By this time, I had retired from journalism and had converted our Horsley Park sheds to a worm farm. While we attended the match, Bet would follow on television. When we arrived home late at night from the one-day matches, she was as happy as we were – Australia always won in those days.

However, I have lost contact with Warren. Journalism – my brand of it, anyway – can be a lonely life; there is no time for continued contact; a large proportion of the public do not want such close contact, in any case, for fear they may end up being featured in the news!

In Warren's case, my stroke in 1999 was partly responsible, together with the subsequent necessary changes of residences, firstly to Kingswood and then to St Marys.



Due to the long hours I worked – longer than any other staff member – even the town clerk found it harder and harder to get to work on time in the mornings. The late knock-off times

were caused by the necessity of conferring with the respective mayors when they became free of appointments late in the day. The late morning starts did not sit well with the rest of the staff – particularly Ernie Douglas. The extended hours also played up with my war disability of dysentery. As I had prided myself, always, by being sensitive to atmosphere, be it commercial, political, social or even domestic, I resigned from the public relations job.

The dysentery problem was probably the worst it had ever been. My resignation from the job came within the same time span as my resignation from Rotary due to the same tummy trouble (chronic bacillary dysentery, with irritable bowel syndrome) that had plagued me ever since the war.

A lengthy fight ensued to claim my superannuation entitlements. Insurance companies – as superannuation organizations really are – fight hard to retain a client's money. I had the same problem with the AMP Society when I was hard pressed for cash after my first marriage broke up. At the conclusion of the fight, which I won, eventually, I was glad to see the back of Fairfield City Council.

My successor at the Advance, Brian Hart, knowing full well what I had to put up with under the shadow of "Black" Douglas, offered me a part time job of two days weekly sub-editing. Brian, too, had experienced Ernie's wrath after being let into the council chambers after hours by yours truly for a press conference. Brian was now the editor of the Liverpool Leader, still owned by Cumberland Newspapers, but leased out to a private entrepreneur. The boss's name is now in limbo, but he, like Brian could have been conscious of the number of times I had side-tracked supplement material and other worthwhile news-printing jobs in Cumberland's direction. Whatever the reason behind the employment offer, it proved successful from both points of view.

I welcomed the freedom from work on the three free days of the week, and realized I was at a stage in life, in my early 60's, that I wanted to ease out of the pressures of journalism. Not that there was no pressure during my two days a week sub-editing. But there was not the pressure of finding and writing my own stories. Brian did that. All I had to do was put a heading on them and occasionally cut or amplify the story to fit the allotted space.

However, there were these three days a week to fill somehow. I had become interested in breeding worms as a means of getting suitable bait for fishing. After starting in a small way, I soon gained a reputation for having and supplying fat fish-winning worms. The demand was such that I was forced to say "goodbye" to journalism and "hello" to fishermen.

chapter thirty two – worm farmer

M

y conversion from full-time journalist to proposed part-time hobby-worm-farmer really started on one of my fishing trips.

I never expected the farm to take off as it did, but the hobby worm farm soon became full-time employment, never the less an enjoyable recreation for me. I could never have managed it without the support – active working support – by Bet, to whom, I know, that support was not recreation.

On a particular fishing trip to Burrinjuck Dam, I called in at the Wonder-Worm Farm, just south of Mittagong. I had previously been shown around the farm during a previous trip, when I had bought 100 worms to be used as bait. This trip, I ordered 1000 worms, costing \$50, to be picked up on my return journey.

I well remember that the worm farm proprietor was on Easter holidays at the South Coast, with his family. I only caught him at home because he had received an urgent order for some tens of thousands of worms to stock a new farm. On my return home, I put my lonely 1000 worms in an old cement trough in a galvanized iron shed that had been erected by the original chicken farmer. I had managed to drill nine holes in each half of the double tub (trough) for drainage.

Thus began 10 years of hobby farming, concentrating on supplying tiger worms to freshwater fishermen as bait. Gardeners, too, bought them for their own miniature worm farms, but my main customers were the freshwater fishermen.

Worms come in various types and sizes. My tiger worms were named for the alternate stripes of light (cream) and dark (grey) colours running around their bodies. They were about eight or nine centimetres long, an ideal size in my opinion – and that of my 100 or so permanent customers – to catch trout, perch and any other type of freshwater fish. A few customers maintained that a much smaller worm, the red wiggler, was better bait, but the very same customers kept coming back for more tigers.

I bought textbooks and studied the method of worm farming. I soon learned how they mated- their sexual organs are in the front of each worm, separated by about two or three millimetres only. Two worms engage sexually head-to-head, with the male organ of each coinciding with the female organ of the other. They appeared to be tied in a knot. When

they pulled apart, a whitish latex-like substance encased the egg, the size being a little larger than a regular pinhead but smaller than the average match-head. The eggs gradually turned yellow to orange on maturity in about a week's time. Then the egg hatched up to a dozen baby worms. The rate of reproduction was such that I was continually on the lookout for cement laundry tubs and/or Styrofoam broccoli boxes. I finished up with 14 tubs and 53 boxes.

For bedding, I raided the horse manure bins outside most of the stables at Warwick Farm Racecourse, placed there for the general public to help themselves, free of charge. Later, I graduated to the "mucking-out" horse manure heap of my neighbour-but-one at Horsley Park, who kept horses for show riding. The manure there was also free of charge, in return for keeping a watchful eye on the horses when they were allowed to run in the paddock of another neighbour.

Before the manure could be used as bedding – the "home" of the worms – it had to be "washed". This was done in yet another concrete laundry tub, by thoroughly soaking with water. When completely "clean", manure was mixed with peat moss until the correct degree of acidity was reached- a shade on the acid side of neutral.

Bet became the food controller, making up the food in advance of feeding, most of which she also found time to do. I purchased bags of wheat from a local pet food store. I purchased a small electric mill from a firm in Dandenong, Victoria. Bet proceeded to grind the wheat, storing it, mixed with an infinitesimally small amount of calcium carbonate, in two-litre ice-cream containers for future use. I never realized what a boring chore it was for Bet until I was able to read a letter she had written to her cousin May. On May's death, her sons returned the letters to me, Bet having died four years before May. Bet had told May how thrilled she was that I had decided to sell the worm farm because she was sick of feeding the worms and of processing the food.

In the same letter she had told of the grinding mill catching alight and her endeavour, in my absence, to put out the flames. "I thought I would have to go back to grinding the wheat by hand because Tas would not buy another mill when he was going to get rid of the farm. But, bless him, he was on the phone next day, ordering another mill from that dear man at Dandenong. And it turned out to be a better mill."

In the early days, before the advent of the grinding mill, we fed the worms on layer mash, a mixture of grains such as wheat and oats, ground into a powder designed for feeding laying fowls. There was a fair proportion of whole grain retained in the mash, so Bet's job was to sieve the mash, discarding the whole grain. Before we learned to sieve the mash, we fed it directly on to the surface of the bedding. The worms quickly ate the fine powder, similar to flour, but were slow to eat the grain. This resulted in the grain turning to mould and fermenting, causing the bedding to sour.

None of the food was wasted. The sieved grain was then scattered to the birds, which soon learned to flock around when they anticipated the usual time for the scattering. Even the mash escaping the journey from sieve to feed bin, which formed a film on the cement floor, was quickly lapped up by our dog Smokey, the faithful Labrador-Alsation cross.

It may appear, thus far, that Bet did the main hard, mind deadening work. That was not the case. Any success we had depended on the presentation of our finished product- juicy fat worms for enticing fish to bite. This involved physically grading, hand counting the worms. Hour after hour, most days – Sundays included – I repetitively counted 100 worms, placing them into small containers of peat moss, and labelling those containers. In the summer, when demand was greatest, our tin shed became almost unbearably hot, only the double doors each end being widely open made it possible to continue working.

I never heard, during those 10 years, of another worm farm that actually counted 100 worms per container. They mainly relied on weighing the worms, if not actually judging the size only of 100 worms. On my fishing trips, I continually sampled the oppositions' products. They

either badly fell short in number, down to less than 50 in average, or were so minimally small as to make them worthless as bait. Fishermen were able to buy our "Tepee" brand for five dollars or the worthless competitors' brand for as little as three dollars. There were one or two worthy competitors, such as "Wonder Worm" at Mittagong, but they were the exceptions. My label, named for my initials and showing a depiction of a Red Indian tepee as a logo was much sought after. One customer found a farm trying to sell worms with a copy of our label on the containers. I did not do anything about it, because the news quickly spread among the fishing fraternity to avoid buying at North Richmond.

A few of our customers – only two or three – tried to make us reduce the price to three dollars, in line with most of our competitors, but they kept coming back for 300 or 400 or more at five dollars. Our three grand children – Rebecca (Becky), Ricky and Emily – loved to serve our customers. As soon as one drove in, one of them would grab a container and race down to serve the said customer. It was the highlight of their visit to Grandma and Grandpa.

We occasionally obtained orders from interstate and far regions within our state of New South Wales. I advertised in a "green" magazine (environmentally friendly) to provide worms by the thousand. I cannot remember the price, but I think it was \$50- no discount for large quantities! In effect, there was a discount, because we paid the freight and the price of packaging. Bet sewed the four-litre ice cream container into a tight fitting calico bag.

Our interstate customers were in Gippsland (Victoria) and the Barossa Valley in South Australia, while our intrastate customers ranged from the Riverina up to the North Coast. I found out that rail service was better than air and/or road transport.

A mild stroke (cardiac arrest) the day after my 80th birthday brought to a halt our plans to continue the worm farm. Ivan, Ethel (Ivan's wife), and sister Betty had come up from Victoria for that milestone in my life. I had woken up, the morning after and tried to say "good morning" to Bet. Words failed me; I could not vocalize any words at all. I realized there was something radically wrong and tried to say: "We have got to get to a doctor". After a struggle, I managed to say "got" and that was the sole result of my plea.

Fortunately, Bet was equal to the occasion and soon had me bundled into the car on the way to young Dr Singh, the son of Dr Rampal Singh, the best doctor I have known. Dr Singh the younger, took one look at me, saw the telltale drooping lines at the corner of my mouth and sent me off to the new Fairfield District Hospital which I had fought for, editorially, throughout the years.

As a result of the hospital treatment, I can say more words than "got". I can make myself understood, usually, particularly if I have time to prepare, in my mind, what I am going to say. However, if I am speaking extemporaneously, I get 'tongue-tied', especially if I become emotional. For a person who loves the English language, whose profession is based on the use of the correct words, this handicap is frustrating in the extreme. Most people are very understanding when the situation is explained, but there are the odd individuals whose impatience and lack of understanding make me feel 'second class' or even 'third class' or, worst of all, 'bottom of the class'.

After a couple of X-rays while in hospital, the brain specialist found a tiny black spot in the front of the brain. He considered that was the result of the stroke, but decided there was no further danger from it. The speech therapy he recommended did not do much good. The therapist was straight out of university and everything she tried did not work. It was probably as much my fault, because I could not believe in it. While I was convalescing at home, our dog, Smokey, knew there was something badly wrong. He parked himself on the front door mat. Being summer by this time, we had the front door open most of the time, and he could see me sitting in my chair. Bet opened the screen door a couple of times each day, with the result of Smokey racing over to the chair, climbing on to the arm and licking me frenziedly.

The stroke put an end to the worm farm. We never did sell it.

chapter thirty three – complete retirement, only to lose Bet

Wendy and Mike reacted marvellously. Unbeknown to us, they started looking for alternate accommodation, something with smaller grounds to look after, something a bit closer to Gunguru Street, Orchard Hills.

It took them several weeks, but they eventually came up with a unit in Bringelly Road, Kingswood, an address with the same postcode of their own home.

Only a few years old, it had three bedrooms, which enabled the grandchildren to sleepover, not that they often did. However, we, Bet in particular, did see more of them. The three of them were each in a different school and Bet, more so than I, helped pick them up after school.

The only sadness occasioned by our transfer from Horsley Park to our Kingswood unit revolved around Smokey. Dogs were a “no-no” in units. Nobody else was found to give him a home, so he had to be put down. In some respects, that was a kindness, for Smokey was afflicted in his hind legs with arthritis. He could no longer comfortably chase cats and lizards up trees. He could sit, as he always had done, at the base of a tree, barking by the hour at the treed enemy. And he was still hot stuff on snakes, right up to the last. It was, indeed, a sad day when I took him to the vet for his lethal injection.

A knee replacement in May, 2000, prevented me from further active participation in the school pick-up of our grandchildren (I had been restricted from driving for six months after the stroke in October 1999). The operation went smoothly – as smooth as any such operation could be – but I was not allowed to drive a car for a further six months after discharge from hospital, making a continuous 12 months ban from driving. The only driving I did was to reverse the blue Ford into the unit garage, which was located on the side of the unit, not the front. The narrow drive between the side fence and the garage proved very difficult for Bet to drive into the garage, either forwards or in reverse.

That difficulty was solved, well before the operation, by Michael buying us a brand new small three cylinder blue Daewoo Matiz, selling the larger Ford sedan to partially compensate for the expense. Bet immediately named the new car “Toby”. She accompanied Michael to the showroom when purchasing Toby and she chose the colour blue for my sake. The car was registered in Bet’s name – the only brand new car she had

owned outright. Being a manual geared car proved no problem to Bet. She harked back to the days she drove her Dad's Humber through the streets of Melbourne, well before the invention of automatic gears.

Rebecca introduced her own colour scheme to the third bedroom of the unit – the room the grandchildren used for sleepovers. Writing of this five or so years later – in April 2006 – my memory tells me the colours were red and orange.

Naturally, in the aftermath of the stroke and the knee operation six months later, my activities were rather limited. However, I occupied myself by doing a bit of gardening and, after the operation, exercising by walking the neighbourhood. Geoff and Sandy Hollier loaned me an exercise bike, which also filled in an hour or so each day. I planted poppies in a round bed in the centre of the front lawn, to give Bet a bit of pleasure. She had always been fond of poppies, and frequently told the story of the bee that entered the hospital ward seeking the pollen from the poppies I had brought after Wendy was born.

There were two badly neglected rose bushes in that round bed – an Iceberg and a Freesia (the latter named for its freesia-like fragrance) – which I pruned back into good health. Then I grew tomatoes in small beds in the very restricted rear courtyard. Our meals included tomatoes for a very long period after the plants started to bear fruit. The owner of the block of three units employed a gardener, so I was spared the trouble of mowing the lawns. I also had planted torenia (a type of miniature petunia) and verbena in two hanging baskets installed on a frame placed on the front porch. The torenia did particularly well and was a pretty picture. Alas, a passer-by thought so, too, and purloined it for his/her porch late one night.

We had settled into a routine of sorts – Bet doing the housework and baby-sitting the grandchildren, me doing my exercises, including a daily walk of an hour or more, maintaining the car and gardening – when Bet became ill. On March 19, 2001, a little over a year since we had shifted to Kingswood, I took Bet to see Dr Mark Graydon, the G.P. who had been looking after my extensive medical requirements. In all those nigh-on 50 years that we had been together, Bet had only attended a doctor two or three times for minor ailments. Now Dr Graydon was unable to determine the exact cause of the trouble referring her to a heart specialist, with an appointment for April 2.

The specialist, Dr Lee, found Bet had an enlarged heart, with a heart murmur. Bacterial infection had entered the blood stream and lodged in the heart. He admitted her to Nepean District Hospital immediately. That night, before Bet had even been allocated to a ward, a nurse in the holding section of the hospital told me that my wife “had simply worn herself out.” This diagnosis made me feel guilty. I still feel guilty.

Thus began a five week stay in hospital for Bet, with test after test being done, none of which proved conclusive. Within a week, Bet had had two MRI scans and an ultra-sound. A spot on the liver was suspected as the source of the infection in the heart. She had been placed on a penicillin drip, which was soon changed to another medication – one of the “myacin” family (my knowledge of medications is deplorable, but I think it was gentamicin). She had a catheter installed to allow the kidneys to function. There was an irregular heartbeat and Bet was placed on a heart monitor. After about three weeks, Bet was given morphine to enable her to sleep. This was given on the night after the hospital had taken a bioscopy of her liver. A colonoscopy proved unsuccessful, so a barium enema was given.

I was told at this stage, three weeks later, that Bet had been suffering pneumonia on admission to hospital.

The day after Bet was admitted to hospital, I received a letter from my daughter Judith telling me that she and Stephen, the love of her life, planned to visit me at Easter. They arrived at my doorstep on Easter Saturday, April 14, twelve days after Bet had been admitted to hospital.

I gave them afternoon tea, "the first afternoon tea I have had with my father", said Judith. It was the first time in almost 59 years that I had done anything with my second-born. I had asked Bet if she wanted to meet Judith. She diplomatically replied: "No, you spend all of the time with her." I guessed that Bet was not well enough to face up to the occasion, and possibly did not want to meet Judith for the first time in a hospital environment.

Bet started to improve in health a month after going into hospital. On May 2, she was able to take a couple of short walks in the hospital corridor, with the aid of a walking frame. During all of that month, Wendy had been bringing me three or four cooked meals each week, including some straight from the barbecue. Don and Margaret Bate from the church had also been providing bowls of soup. Between them and heating up store-bought frozen foods, I was able to get three meals a day. I mostly walked the mile or so up to the hospital.

Sometimes Wendy drove me home, but I remember a couple of times, after waiting for her to turn up, I started walking home, only to find her stranded with her car, about halfway home. The electronics on her Ford, at this stage, were playing up, but were later permanently fixed.

Bet eventually returned home to the Kingswood unit from hospital on Thursday, May 10. An occupational therapist had visited the unit on the Monday to arrange for us to obtain meals-on-wheels, and to organize community transport if we required it. I must have been banned from driving for 12 months because of the knee replacement in May, 2000. On that very day that Bet came home, I had a pre-arranged refresher driving lesson.

I had a second driving lesson on May 22. I did not cover myself with glory, mainly because Toby's turning indicator lever was on the opposite side of the steering lever to the Ford (and practically all other makes of cars). However, by July 4, I was confident enough to drive down to Nepean Motors for a regular maintenance check-up. (By that date, we were due for a 15,000 kilometre check, but we had only driven 5,765 ks).

In the meantime, we mostly relied on community transport for attending medical appointments, etc. Bet's first drive since her hospitalization was on the day before I drove down for that maintenance check-up.



An occupational therapist arranged for us to have meals-on-wheels, at \$5 each, with frozen meals to tide us over the weekend. That service did not last more than a few weeks, because neither Bet nor I liked the meals. The cooking was done at Emu Plains Prison Farm, and maybe the thought that we were getting the same food as the prisoners could have had a negative influence on us. Whatever the reason, we went back to providing our own meals. I ended up doing most of the cooking, under Bet's supervision. I had previously told the volunteer deliverers of the meals-on-wheels that I was "chief cook and bottle-washer". Whereupon one of the volunteers, who I think was one of our church ladies, proceeded to give me advice, such as the correct way to hang washed shirts on the clothes line.

Wendy did our shopping, taking Bet along when she felt able to go. However, she was still having medical appointments with Dr Mark Graydon. In the first week of being home, Bet was cleared of malignancy in the liver bioscopy she had endured in hospital. She was still a bit feeble on her feet, and she was rescued in the nick of time by Mike when stumbling on the stairs at their home when Wendy had us there for a belated Mothers' Day lunch.

In successive weeks, Bet was treated with antibiotics for an infection in her urine and had a medical appointment with the heart specialist, Dr Lee. I, too, was having medical treatment for fluid in the legs, particularly around the ankles. Bet told Dr Graydon that I had sleep problems, and he booked me in for an appointment with a specialist, Dr Parsons.

As a result of the appointment with Dr. Parsons, I underwent a sleep apnoea test and wound up with a special apparatus to help me with my breathing when sleeping. I persevered with it for about a year, but it was not very successful, often making my nose

bleed. I had an accessory for the apparatus to counter the nosebleeds, but I was very uncomfortable with the whole experiment and had to give it away completely.

I was more successful in gaining Department of Veterans' Affairs approval for the supply of shoes. My podiatrist at the time, Simon Lee, at Rooty Hill, recommended to the department that I be given shoes of a type to alleviate the pain caused by ingrown toenails. I gained the first pair, under this arrangement, in early July.

On the first Sunday in August, Bet was able to attend church for the first time in four months, due to her illness and hospitalization. A few days earlier Dr. Mark Graydon had given her the OK to resume driving the car. Mostly I had been doing all the driving to medical appointments and so on, even before I had been given the all-clear from the knee operation. I remember at one stage locking the keys in Toby (our Daewoo car) at the pharmacy across the road from the hospital. I knew Wendy would probably still be at Bet's bedside, so I rang the ward. Wendy came over on her bicycle, then road back to her home to pick up her set of Toby's keys. The chemist, Les Newey, often recalled the occasion. He was impressed with Wendy's immediate reaction.

On August 13, a Monday, Bet had yet another medical appointment at 3pm, an ultra-sound on her ovaries. However, in the morning, Bet was hardly able to get out of bed. I rang Dr Graydon, hoping to get him to call on the way to his surgery. He was unable to do this, but over the phone diagnosed a possible gall bladder problem. I immediately took Bet to hospital, where X-rays pointed to possible spinal degeneration as the cause of the problem. We returned home from the hospital at 4pm.

From this stage onwards, we were at Dr Graydon's surgery every few days; Bet with pain in hip and leg, constipation and lack of appetite; me with fluid swelling in left leg. Bet was a very sick lady, wheelchair-bound, unable to visit Gunguru Street for her birthday on the 22nd of August, so the family came down to Bringelly Road. Dr Graydon was unsatisfied with an X-ray of Bet's hip, and re-admitted her to hospital on August 27.

After various doctors had seen her for various treatments, the diagnosis was "arthritis of the hip". She was discharged from hospital on September 5, for the second time within four months, not to mention the daylong visit on August 13.

Two days later, a visit to the heart specialist Dr Lee resulted in his assessment that Bet had "multi-system disease". We never found out just what that meant in detail. Another three days later, Bet was X-rayed yet again. This time, the gall bladder showed small traces of stones – no threat, according to Dr Graydon – and the good news that the chest X-ray showed "all clear".



Throughout this period, a community nurse, Danielle, was making weekly visits. We had first met her in late May.

It was Bet, listening to the radio, who first became aware of the 9/11 tragedy – as the Yanks designate it – on September 11, when terrorists flew aeroplanes into the Twin Towers of New York. She called out from her bed to me in the kitchen, where I was preparing her breakfast, to turn on the TV. When I had seen the horrific scenes on the TV, she joined me.

To my mind, that was the beginning of the end for my dear wife. It affected her greatly, and I think she just gave up wanting to live in a world in which such a thing could happen. It could be very wrong. It was not long before I was to take Bet to hospital for the last time. After she had been admitted, but before being allocated a ward bed, one of the nurses, in response to my questioning her condition, said- "Poor dear, she is just worn out".

That analysis made me feel guilty and haunts me to this very day. I think of the early time Bet went back to work after Wendy was born. I know Bet enjoyed her work in each and every

job she had, but there was still the necessity for her to work. Probably it was not necessary while I was still editor of the Nepean Times, on an editor's salary, but having to drop back to a B Grade journalist's pay made living more expensive, particularly with a young infant to provide for.

I think, too, of the time before I was able to buy Bet a car, of the days when she had to wheel the pusher with Wendy in it, all the way down to Kevin Lee's grocery store from our home at Emu Plains. It was only three kilometres, at the most, but Bet had to do it in all kinds of weather.

On the Monday after the September 11 terrorist attack in New York, Bet had yet another appointment with the heart specialist Dr Lee. This time he prescribed steroids for Bet to take. There is a gap in my diary for a fortnight concerning Bet's health problems, so the steroids were ostensibly having no ill effects. That was all turned upside down two weeks after the visit to Lee.

It was a wet drizzly Tuesday night. Bet called out from her bedroom with a pain in her chest and was having great difficulty with breathing. I called an ambulance through the triple 000 phone number, alternately standing out in the rain as guide to the ambulance and dashing in to Bet to see if I could help Bet cope with the obvious heart attack. The ambulance was quick to arrive, although it seemed an eternity at the time.

The two paramedics soon had Bet sedated, with the breathing under control. We arrived at Nepean District Hospital at approximately 10.30pm. I had told Bet I would ring Wendy, but she immediately vetoed it, making her more distressed as she did so. This puzzled me and it was days later before the puzzle was solved. The day after the attack, Wendy had an appointment with Penrith Press for the three children to be photographed. Bet did not want anything to interfere with the excitement the children would have at seeing their photo in the paper. If I remember correctly, the story and picture were connected with some church achievement of the three Allan kids.

My recollection of my subsequent movements that night is hazy, but I probably followed the ambulance up to the hospital in Toby. I know I was at Bet's bedside in the temporary ward where patients are taken before being allocated to a permanent ward. The diary does not help me determine what time I got home.

I rang the hospital at 8am the next morning and was told Bet was sleeping, having been admitted under the care of Dr Lee. At 9am I was told that the sleep apnoea machine was ready for me. There were a number of telephone calls I had to make, including Dr Graydon and the community nurse Danielle, but, under Bet's stressful directions, I still did not ring Wendy. I must have rung her that night, after spending the day by Bet's bedside.

The next day, Thursday, October 4, at 3pm while at the hospital, I was told by an Intensive Care specialist, Dr Ian Seppell that Bet would die within a few minutes if she was not rushed to the Intensive Care Unit immediately. After I gave the sought after approval, Bet was literally rushed, on the run, to the ICU. I could not keep up with the fast receding bed, but when I did reach the unit, I tearfully rang Wendy. When Wendy arrived, I completely broke down, a couple of church hospital visitors consoling me in the meantime. Wendy was very strong, helping me to recover, giving the appearance of being in control of the situation, however much it would have affected her, too.

The ICU doctors and nurses put Bet on a dialysis machine to counter the renal failure, and breathing apparatus to enable her to breathe. I must have walked up to the hospital that day, because Wendy drove me home at 1am.

By noon the next day, Friday, October 5, Bet's body functions – blood, temperature, kidneys and breathing – were practically back to normal. I had arrived at her bedside by 9am with a copy of that week's Penrith Press, showing a page 2 photo of Becky, Ricky and Emily packing Christmas parcels for our Uniting Church's contribution to aid African countries

under-privileged children. This was the photo taken on the day after Bet's heart attack and which Bet did not want news of her illness to prevent.

Bet was taken off the dialysis and breathing machines at midday. A CT scan showed Bet had an infection at the back of the heart and an enlarged liver.

The next day, Saturday, Bet was taken off oxygen at 10.30am, but was back on it by 4pm. She was able to talk to Wendy and me and eat minute amounts of lunch and dinner, feeding herself at dinnertime.

Dr. Seppell, at 10.30am on Sunday, while pleased with Bet's progress, thought she may have to be back on dialysis later. I think this was the day that Wendy brought the three grandchildren – Becky, Ricky and Emily – to say goodbye to their beloved Grandma. As was usual for Ricky, he was greatly interested in all of the hospital equipment – the dialysis machine and the breathing apparatus.

In between all of the hospital visits, I had been tested for the need of a sleep apnoea machine. This had involved a couple of visits to a clinic at Camperdown, which I found out years later was part of Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. The machine was delivered the day Bet was returned from the intensive care unit to her bed in the ward. I could not have cared less about the machine, which eventually proved to be a burden rather than a health benefit.

Bet's return to the ward was only achieved after a dramatic incident in which there was excessive bleeding from an artery where a cannula had been removed.

To demonstrate Bet's strength of mind amidst the trauma she was suffering, she asked Wendy to buy a copy of Shane Warne's autobiography to give me for my birthday on October 11. Wendy, Mike and the children gave me a party in my home, a subdued party under the circumstances, but a pleasant thought by Mike and Wendy. I received phone calls from Ivan and Carol, further examples of thoughtfulness. I had to cancel a proposed visit to Bet by Carol because of Bet's inability to talk due to the throat soreness from the tube that had been placed into her lungs as part of the breathing machine equipment. I greatly regretted cancelling Carol's visit, as she has been a staunch friend, always ready to lend a hand when needed, without being asked.

Bet's cousin May Lucas was another person who was concerned about Bet's poor health. May and Bet had kept up a regular correspondence and I contacted May as soon as Bet went into hospital. Consequently, there were many phone calls between us, May and me, concerning Bet's progress or lack of it. May would write to Bet while in hospital, addressing the letters to our Kingswood address. On Saturday and Sunday, October 13 and 14, my sister Betty and May rang to say there were letters on the way. They would be the last letters Bet would receive.

On the Tuesday following, I received a telephone from a doctor treating Bet, seeking a family conference. There were two doctors involved in the conference with Wendy and me. They asked us for a decision whether to return Bet to the intensive care unit or not. It was the considered opinion of the doctors that Bet had only a few days to live and the ICU would only prolong the situation only a few extra days.

Wendy and I discussed the problem and decided to leave the decision to Bet herself, as she was lucid enough to consider the question. Bet's previous reaction to the ICU was a guiding influence in our decision. Therefore it was no surprise when Bet decided against the ICU. One of the doctors – I think his name was Dr Hanali – said "We will not abandon you." Bet's reply was: "If you will not abandon me, I will not abandon you". Courageous to the end, Bet faced death with a touch of humour.

The following day, Bet was placed on morphine. The other doctor involved in the family conference, Dr Cass, wanted to know if we wanted a firm diagnosis for the cause of death. She said it would involve an autopsy. I said no to an autopsy and Wendy agreed.

I made several phone calls to say Bet's passing was imminent. Those I rang included Dianne Nightingale (Bet's niece), my brother and sister Ivan and Betty, Barbara, May Lucas and Carol Rowlands (my niece-in-law). Carol wanted to come over from Revesby to say goodbye to Bet. My diary for the next day is blank – as blank as my mind was on that day – so I don't remember if Carol made it, but I have a strong feeling that she did.

Bet passed away at approximately 8.30am on Friday, October 19, 2001. Wendy just made it to the hospital in time to share her mother's last minutes. Unfortunately, I did not arrive until a few minutes after Bet died. I was shattered. Someone must have rung John Martin, our Uniting Church minister, perhaps it was Wendy, for she coped very well, much better than I could have.

John took me to a private lounge and let me grieve, counselling me the whole time while Wendy continued coping. I know Wendy would be grieving, too, quietly, but not showing emotion publicly. I think Bet would have prepared her for this day. Wendy's religious faith would have stood by her and, perhaps most of all, she had a wonderful husband, Mike, who would have guided her through the days to come, both by words and, most importantly, deeds.

We must have visited the funeral directors, John Price and Son, sometime on Friday, to make the arrangements for the funeral arrangements. I remember Mike was with us, for he offered, and I accepted, to meet the financial requirements, on a temporary basis.

By coincidence, that weekend the church had programmed a children's camp – the annual "Getaway" – and Mike wisely decided the three grandchildren should continue to participate. So he took them to the camp, up in the Blue Mountains that year, I think, and stayed with them. Wendy stayed home, brought me some dinner on Saturday, which we had together. We had decided to have a private cremation and a thanksgiving service at the church afterwards.

Rev. John Martin came to my unit at 5pm on the Sunday and with Wendy present, he put together a brief history of Bet's life. I wrote a six-minute eulogy to be read by Rev Stephen Robinson, the husband of Wendy's close schoolmate and lifelong friend, Jenny Gardiner. John Martin was a wonderful minister, with a great pastoral sense. From the early days of his Penrith ministry, he worked very closely with – and was very supportive of – Wendy through her years of being Sunday school superintendent.

Apparently, I had repeated the phone calls of last Wednesday, October 17, confirming Bet's death. Ivan rang me late on Monday morning from the train en route from Sydney to say he, Ethel and sister Betty were on the way to Penrith. He had booked one of the self-contained cottages at Nepean Shores, a retirement village establishment owned by Penrith Rugby League Club catering also for travellers. Diane and Daniel Nightingale, accompanied by Diane's sister Margot, had eventually arrived there, unbeknownst to me at the time. They had travelled up from Melbourne by car.

The funeral was scheduled for 11am at Pine Grove crematorium, with a thanksgiving memorial service at the church at 12.30pm. I had my doubts that I would get through both services, but, as is the case when needs must, I did. I had loaned the little car, "Toby", to Ivan and it was a comfort to me to have my two remaining siblings, along with Ethel, with me, travelling together to the funeral and service. It was a bit cramped for the girls in the back seat, but they managed.

Stephen made a good reading of my eulogy, so far as it went. I feel I did not do half the justice to Bet's life, our love and life together. Her niece, Margot, spoke lovingly of her "tante", as Diane and she, exercising their French, used to call Bet in their childhood. Bet had been more than aunt to them during their very early years, almost a mother to them during the World War II and post-war years. Their father, Ken, was serving in the army and occupation forces in Japan and their mother, Marjorie, was working.

Bet's boss during her latter working days, the St Marys accountant Kevin Houseman, lauded her ability as his bookkeeper, saying she was the best staff member he had ever had. Kevin has been a good, stalwart friend to me ever since, particularly through my three hospitalizations since then.

As I have said before, Wendy was stronger than I was during this trying time for both of us. She supported me, as always, during the funeral services, being very attentive. As I have also said before, she had the strong support of Mike. What I have not said before, Wendy had two great friends to fall back on- her very close friend, Sunday school and church colleague Sandy Hollier, and her schoolmate, playmate and long time friend, Jenny Robinson. Of latter years, Sandy and her family have been very close to Wendy, sharing the good times and the not so good times, whereas Jenny, although the friendship is as strong as ever, has been in distant parts of the state.

At the funeral, Ivan offered to pay for Bet's ashes to be enshrined at the crematorium in any fashion I desired. This broke me up into tears. I told him I would consult with Wendy, after thanking him for his kind offer. I did speak to Wendy, later, about the offer and she wanted to think it over. She soon got back to me with the suggestion that we accept the funeral director's offer of storing the ashes until such time that we could decide what we wanted to do with them. Wendy came up with the suggestion – no doubt after consultation with wise Mike – that the ashes remain with the funeral parlour until they could be combined with mine and thus become a joint memorial. Almost five years later, that is still the situation. I conveyed that decision to Ivan by phone after he had returned to Victoria. I hope he understood and was not hurt by us having declined his kind, thoughtful offer. Penrith City Council was, at the time, developing a part of its cemetery to provide a place where ashes could be placed as a memorial area. I have often thought that I should have reserved space for our combined ashes, but I have never done so.

After the funeral and the memorial service, we gathered at Wendy's – Margot, Diane, Dan, Ivan, Ethel and Betty and my immediate family. Ivan was at his conversationalist best to try and clear the cloud of gloom. He valiantly tried to draw me out of that gloom, but I could not respond.

Ivan, Ethel and Betty returned to Melbourne on the Friday following the funeral. After they had left Penrith, my grieving became stronger. It was not helped by graffiti I noticed on the driveway globular light: "I look into your soul through eyes of death". It must have been written there during the previous night, obviously referring to Bet's death. The estate agents, Raine and Horne sympathetically received my immediate telephone request to remove the graffiti. It was gone the next morning, Saturday.

For various reasons, I determined to attend church regularly, starting the very next day. I thought it would help the grandchildren ease the loss of their grandma by having me in the pew alongside them every Sunday. The Rev John Martin, having been so kind and thoughtful in a pastoral manner, also deserved, in my mind, some recognition by my presence. I, too, felt guilty of not having supported Bet by accompanying her more often to church. I did keep regular attendance from that Sunday for five years until hospitalized by a broken hip and consequent golden staphylococcal infection.

That first Sunday after the funeral our three grandchildren performed in the youth band: Becky on flute, Ricky on organ (or was it piano?), and Emily singing. I admire the way Wendy and Mike – mostly Mike, I am sure – have insisted the children have a musical education. The assumption that Mike is the guiding force is based on his part time occupation as a member of a band – subsidiary to his full time computer-based job. Those music gigs, in addition to his other earlier part time stint as public address system provider, must have stood the family in good stead financially. The three young ones have progressed musically to the point they have composed, played and sung a song at this year's (2006) Sunday school weekend camp.

During Bet's hospitalization, I was undergoing tests for sleep apnoea, at Bet's instigation before she became ill. She had mentioned a couple of times that she had been awakened often by me struggling to get my breath while deeply asleep. In her words: "I thought you were not going to breathe again, ever."

As a result of two tests at Camperdown Sleep Apnoea Clinic (apparently an offshoot of Royal Prince Alfred Hospital), I received a sleep apnoea machine on September 9, 2001, just seven weeks before Bet's death. From the night I received it, I tried to accustom myself to wearing the mask that provided air under a light pressure.

After persevering for a week or so, I started to get nosebleeds in the middle of the night. The breathing specialist, Dr. Parsons, again referred me to the sleep apnoea clinic, which recommended the addition of a humidifier, at a cost of \$397. Dr. Parsons eventually organized the Department of Veterans' Affairs to provide the humidifier at no cost. I tried wearing the mask with the machine operating with the humidifier for a few weeks, but the nose still bled. I was happy to discard the machine; I never liked it. Actually, I still have the complete machine somewhere. Years later, when I was in hospital with a broken hip, the rehabilitation doctor strongly recommended I re-visit the sleep apnoea clinic with a view to having the latest developments in the treatment. I did make an appointment but I could not face doing the tests again and cancelled it. At my age, now approaching 87, I'll take my chances.

chapter thirty four – a widowers life (or lack of it)

Life without Bet was not my idea of life at all. I was still grieving – still am, really – when Ted and Barbara offered, early in November, to pay my return air fare to Victoria so I could stay with them for a holiday.

I accepted their kind offer gratefully and on November 26 I booked a flight on Ansett for January 11, returning on January 29. The dates so far ahead were timed to coincide with Ted's holiday from work.

At this stage, I must acknowledge the help given to me by Margaret Phillips, of the Aged Care Assistance Team (ACAT). Margaret helped me with the flight booking, suggesting, also, that I take advantage of a mini-bus service running from the Blue Mountains direct to Kingsford Smith aerodrome at Mascot. This was only part of the assistance given by Margaret. It was through her guidance that I gave up renting the unit in Bringelly Road, Kingswood, and applied for a State Housing Department single bedroom unit. Margaret also arranged for home care cleaning, starting immediately with the Kingswood unit. Pam Morey, the home carer that started with me then was still with me five years later, coming every second Friday to vacuum the floors, clean the bathroom, change the bed and share morning tea with me.

Looking at my diary for November 23, 2001, I see: "Am trying to continue memoirs." I am still trying to do so five years later. At that stage, I was writing in longhand about my more interesting days as a journalist. Now, I am using computer writing about my much more mundane and far from interesting life as an old man with no interest in life apart from living until Wendy graduates as a Bachelor of Arts. I need another interest, really.

On November 25, a month out from Christmas and a little over a month since Bet died, I received a Christmas card from Emily, the first of the year 2001. I mention both dates, as I am sure they were connected. At the then age of nine, Emily, our youngest granddaughter, had been very close to both of us, particularly Bet. She is a very thoughtful, loving girl. When she came to visit me, in my lonely state, she would disappear into my bedroom, without telling anyone, and commune with Bet's portrait. She would possibly re-live the "memory" card game she loved to play against Bet. Her early Christmas card to me would have been initiated by a thought of bringing a sense of joy to me, of reminding me that Emily, for one, was thinking of me.

The family, in general, was very supportive of me. Wendy was to prove invaluable when the arrangements had to be made with the Housing Department for me to move to the one-bedroom unit I still occupy in 2006. Another thoughtful person was Bet's former boss Kevin Houseman, who invited me to lunch at Penrith RSL on the second Thursday of December 2001, a monthly lunch date that has continued up to the present time.

Wendy put on her usually wonderful Christmas dinner on Sunday, December 23, the first such dinner without the companionship of Bet. The family left for their holiday home at Wooli later that night. In the exchange of Christmas presents, Ricky, bless him, gave me an elaborate chess set. In the preceding couple of years, we, Ricky and I, sporadically played games of chess. I very rarely won a game. Ricky played chess at school, I don't know if it was part of the curriculum or if he and his mates played during their lunch and recreation breaks. Whatever the case, Ricky proved to be a very quick learner and a very quick mover once he took on anyone at the game.

I think I have mentioned earlier that Ricky learnt to cast a fishing line after only two demonstrations by me. At 17 years of age (his birthday tomorrow actually, as I write this on August 30, 2006), I only hope he can go on to university next year and not suffer the interruptions of tertiary education as I did through lack of finance and World War II. I felt very lonely on Christmas Eve, but Carol Rowlands (nee Pellas, nee Maddern), came to the rescue on Christmas Day. The former wife of Ivan's son, Frank, Carol has a heart of gold, whatever the differences that led to the break-up of her marriage to Frank. Her accountant daughter of her first marriage to Frank, Cindy, was up from Melbourne, and her two sons and daughter from her second marriage were there. We had a lovely Christmas dinner – the second one for me – only marred by the news of devastating bushfires.



As I travelled home to Kingswood, away to the south a stream of dark smoke, almost black, extended from the western horizon, where it started as if from a volcano, crossed the sky, driven by the westerly wind to the far eastern horizon. At Warragamba, where we lived not so long ago, shops and 12 homes were destroyed. With the prevailing wind, our home at the start of Second Street would have been in a direct line from the shops. I have never gone back to find out if this was the case.

There was another bad fire at Emu Plains, the scene of another of our homes. When I heard about that fire I was reminded of the time when I was desperately driving in the same direction from the Fairfield "Advance" hoping that Bet and Wendy were safe. That fire passed within 200 metres of our then home.

On this occasion, more than 100 home were totally destroyed. The fire had crossed the Nepean River at Wallacia and Castlereagh. I can't recall if it was at this time that Canberra lost about 100 homes also, but I'm inclined to think that was a later fire. If so, as I wade through my diaries, another bushfire episode will appear. Among those diary reports of bushfires, stretching from Christmas Eve to New Year's Eve, 2001 appeared an entry foretelling an event that was to trouble me four years later. Dr. Graydon ordered X-rays to solve pains I was experiencing in the lower back region. They showed arthritis in the hip region. I was to spend my 86th birthday in hospital, 2005, with a spontaneous hip fracture (spontaneous meaning due to natural causes, rather than a fall or other obvious injury).

The bushfires continued until January 2. It had been a lonely time for me from Christmas until and including New Year, because Wendy and the family had been at their holiday home at Wooli. The Indian family of Sanjeer Godwani in Unit 2 behind our unit went out of their way to be friendly, particularly the children. Sanjeer, the father, presented me with a tin of biscuits on New Year's Day. The youngsters – a girl aged about 10, a boy about seven and a toddler girl – called me "Uncle". As I have mentioned earlier, I have always got on well with kids. One of the great sorrows of my life in later years is the need to keep myself at a distance from passing acquaintance with children to avoid the possibility of being called a paedophile.



My holiday, courtesy of Barbara and Ted, began on January 11, 2002. I flew down to Melbourne (the diary tells me by Ansett, but surely Qantas had taken Ansett over before 2002). Anyway, whatever plane it was, we had to follow the coastline until the Victorian boundary because the smoke from continuing bushfires was so dense. I was met at Tullamarine Airport by my granddaughter Krista (Barbara's daughter) and her then husband Danny, staying the night with them at their home in Werribee. The next day, they took me up to the home of my sister Betty and her husband Doug Vanstan at Bacchus Marsh. These arrangements had all been organized by Ted in connection with my holiday package present from him and Barbara. I will always be eternally grateful for their effort to snap me out of my grieving.

It was good to be with Betty, the sibling I felt closer to, sharing predominant Leversha genes, whereas Ivan and Shirley had predominant Pellas genes. Doug showed me the single-engine aeroplane he was building in his backyard shed. In his heyday, Doug had been one of the leading glider pilots in Victoria, if not Australia. He had built gliders and visited Germany to study their construction. Later, he drove me out to their former huge wheat-and barley-growing property at Balliang, now sub-divided into five-acre blocks. Their home there will always live in my memory as an explosion of children – all seven of them – bursting forth to greet my wife Betty, daughter Wendy and myself on that first family contact as we arrived in our car and caravan all those years ago.

After two days at Bacchus Marsh I travelled to Bendigo, Ted and Barbara having driven down to pick me up from their home in the Bendigo suburb of Golden Square. A momentarily unfortunate incident, with possible tragic personal consequences, happened as we drove through my, and Barbara's childhood village of Harcourt. We saw a helicopter, with its blades whirling, on the street outside what used to be the site of the grocery-cum-hardware store, within a stone's throw of Barbara's mother's (my former wife's) home. There was a lot of activity immediately in front of Melva's front gate.

"Stop, Ted", Barbara said, "Mum may have been driving out on to the street and another car may have hit her." This could have been logical thinking, originally the Wilson home faced a quiet Harcourt back street, but there had been later radical changes.

In my courtship days, the street had been changed to a direct Bendigo-Melbourne main road, by-passing busy town, about-to-be city, of Castlemaine. (While courting Melva, I had an unhappy experience trying to prevent an accident due to a straying bull calf on the roadway. It charged me, and I became the accident without any vehicles being involved). Years after I had left Harcourt and Melva, with our two daughters, had returned, a permanent detour, involving the demolition of the old store, had removed the major threat. However, the blind access and exit from "Melvyn" still proved dangerous.

So, on my journey from the "Marsh" to Bendigo, I was stranded in a car parked in the shade on the side of the Calder Highway as Ted and Barbara hiked back 200 or more metres to investigate the problem. Fortunately for them, Melva was not involved in the accident, but it was serious and it was outside "Melvyn".

While writing this episode involving my first family, I had a vague idea that I had not fully covered my re-unions with my two daughters of that marriage, Barbara and Judith. So, I trolled up and down these pages on the computer and, so far as I can determine, there is no such detail.

My re-union with Barbara – Judith's came much later – should have appeared during the public relations saga. The reader may recall that the draft of this chapter was interrupted, in the writing of it, by the untimely illness and consequent death of my wife, Betty. In going back to it, some five years ago, I may have intended, in my first hand-written draft, to devote a separate chapter to the re-union, as it richly deserves, or I may have missed it

completely. So, at the risk of making this an unduly long chapter, I now give the details just before our imminent true family re-union dinner.

I still have the letter written by Barbara on October 14, 1975. It was addressed c/- Public Relations, Civic Centre, Spencer St., Fairfield, 2165, N.S.W. marked prominently in large block letters: "PRIVATE" on the front, with an instruction on the back: "PRIVATE To be opened by TP Pellas". Such a precautionary measure was very appropriate in the council bureaucracy, where all of the hundreds of daily letters were sliced open by a machine, before being sorted and directed to the various departments. Barbara's husband, Ted, had obtained the address from my brother, Ivan, who, as the manager of a State branch of a public utility, electricity, would have known the bureaucratic methods. He, Ivan, would also have been able to obtain my business address through the same bureaucratic process, as Barbara most likely wanted to avoid sending the letter to my home address.

The letter was dated October 14, 1975, so it was written three days after my 56th birthday. Barbara was then 28, and it had been, almost 24 years since we had seen each other. It was a very poignant letter, in the sense of very touching and moving, full of yearning, two foolscap handwritten pages long. She asked me to be very honest about deciding whether I wanted to "catch up on the missing years. I am not going to say I will not be disappointed if you make a negative decision, but I am a big girl now, I can take it."

It touched my heart deeply. I am at a loss to describe my heartfelt thankfulness that Barbara had made such an approach, Melva had opposed any such contact. Indeed, even after we re-connected, Barbara kept Melva unaware of our frequent contact. Hence, my lone wait in the hot car in the shade of trees at the side Calder Highway en route to Barbara's Bendigo home.

Having responded positively and kindly to Barbara's 1975 plea, I arranged, with Ted's concurrence, to meet halfway, in Albury. I booked accommodation at a Wangaratta motel (or maybe Ted did), being close to Albury and familiar territory for me. I flew down to Albury and Ted drove up from the Melbourne suburb of Nunawading, where they were then living. Disembarking from the small commuter plane in full view of the terminal, Barbara recognized me as I stepped on to the top step of the gangway. She flew across the tarmac into my arms as I reached ground level.

A year or so later, I drove down, overnight, to their newly acquired home in the suburb of Montrose in the foothills of the Dandenong range, to meet my grandchildren for the first time. I arrived on their doorstep at about 3.00am. I slept in the car in the street until a more reasonable hour. The next morning, it was a different awakening- Brent, then about seven years of age, and Krista, almost two years younger, jumped on my bed and enjoyed a romp with their ageing grandfather, as grandsons and granddaughters are all over the world wont to do. I cannot recall if it was at this meeting or later that I learned that my blind grandson, Brent, demonstrating the fearlessness he has shown during the rest of his life, had a paper run in his Montrose neighbourhood. He rode his bicycle, accompanied by his sister, Krista, on her bike, for guidance.

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My second daughter, Judith, was a lot longer in finding the need to contact her father, 25 years later than Barbara. I have previously described how she and husband-to-be Stephen visited me in Kingswood when Bet was in hospital suffering her terminal illness. That was at Easter, 2001, six months or so since our renewed contact. My aged memory refuses to recollect how and exactly when that contact was made. However, I have kept her letter dated 14th September, 2000, which indicates it happened that month or thereabouts: "Your welcome letter deserves a quick response ... I was betwixt and between as to whether I should really intrude upon you and your life." I would not have kept Judith in suspense after she had made the initial approach, so it would have been early September or late August that it happened.

In that letter of September 14, she mentions the recent break-up of her marriage to Peter McGregor, a former Bendigo hospital chief executive officer, who was then working at a hospital in Lebanon. Judith was currently acting chief executive officer and director of nursing in Heathcote, another Central Victorian town not far from Bendigo. In subsequent correspondence, she told me of her bitter battle with the hospital board of directors, enclosing newspaper cuttings about the clash



But now, in this story of my life, I was waiting in a hot car sheltered from the mid-summer sun by trees at the side of the Calder Highway on the way to a planned family re-union dinner the next day.

The ever-thoughtful Ted, had organized the dinner at the Golden Point Hotel. It was the first meal I had with my Victorian daughters by my side in more than 50 years. At the dinner, I also met for the first time Judith's daughter, Julia, who was due to present me with my first great-grandchild on Anzac Day, in three month's time.

The very next day, Krista rang Barbara to say that her marriage had broken down and she was on the way from Werribee to Bendigo with Mozart, her Labrador dog. Still in the Bendigo district, Krista, in a very short time, was able to continue her banking career, rising in the profession to a highly responsible position.

The relief from the grieving process was further enhanced by the arrival of Brent and his guide dog, Eden, by train straight from his work in Melbourne at Safeway's, the Woolworth's grocery chain. This was a planned surprise for me; we were watching television, when, unannounced, Brent walked in with Eden leading the way. It was only a "flying" overnight visit. It was "all happening" for me.

Within a week of leaving Sydney, I was staying with Ivan and Ethel. The timing was very fortuitous, because our old childhood home and property, "Wahroonga", was up for sale, at \$235,000, and open for inspection. We made a nostalgic visit, amazed at the difference the years had made. It had been renovated with skill- a wall partly removed and a patio added. A huge dam had been created at the end of the swamp area in the paddock below the house paddock, probably draining the swamp. Ethel and I had debate as to the location of the wedding ceremony where the two of us became man and wife in our childhood make-believe 'marriage'. "It was in the back of the shed," Ethel claimed. "It was an open air ceremony *behind* the shed," I maintained.

Julie, Ivan and Ethel's daughter, who accompanied us, was amused at the thought of her mother's bigamous marriage with her future brother-in-law. As had happened once before, on a return to Harcourt North "back-to-school", all the Wahroonga rooms, like the schoolrooms, appeared much smaller to our adult eyes. Among the nostalgic memories, we recalled such activities as my experimentation with the installation of the new-fangled invention, radio, and Ivan's installation of electricity. The tree I climbed in the neighbouring paddock to hang the aerial, and the poles that had to be erected bringing the electricity down from the road were still there, as was the diminutive aeroplane tree from whose uppermost branches we "flew" many a long journey. The "umbrella" tree remained, too, in all its glory.

Sadly, the Harcourt clan of the Pellas family was greatly diminished. "Hillside", the original home, had long been in the hands of strangers, but Ivan and Ethel's son, Philip, was trying to make amends. Never having been a permanent Harcourtian, he had returned to the land of his forefathers and was building a 'do-it-yourself' home on large granite-strewn property on the heights surrounding the Harcourt valley. The original Ford brothers' sheep run on Mount Barker had been sub-divided into farmlets of about 20 to 25 acres.

So, when the reminiscences of the old "Wahroonga" had been fully sated, it was natural to proceed higher up the valley to the new establishment. Philip proudly drove us around the

closer house precincts – it being too hot and the terrain too steep for my old and battered synthetic legs – showing a sample of the 1000 trees and shrubs he had planted. Unfortunately, Stephanie, who had remained with him after his recent marital break-up, was absent for the day.

The day drew towards a close with afternoon tea in Castlemaine in a tearoom opposite our old Technical College and adjacent to Beck's pub which features in the introductory scenes of each instalment of the TV series 'Blue Heelers' (more nostalgia!). To conclude the day, Ivan had booked dinner at the old Castlemaine jail – now turned into a tourist attraction restaurant. We were joined there by Ivan and Ethel's other daughter, Toni. As part of the dinner booking, we were shown around the jail, including the burial sites of prisoners executed by hanging.

A feature of Ivan's home is the number of very artistic tapestries, framed and hanging on the walls. They are all Ivan's own work, partly as a hobby and partly as therapy. I understand they started off as therapy for the stress caused by his high level managerial capacity in the State Electricity Commission of Victoria and by the aftermath of his service in the R.A.A.F. during World War II. He was on his second tour of duty, flying Halifax bombers over Germany, having been decorated twice, by the DFC and Bar. The end result of his tapestry needlework is valued in the thousands of dollars, individual pieces being assessed at more than \$1000.

In that respect – earnings from a hobby – Ivan has done the best of us siblings, although Betty has just this year, 2006, sold her first painting and could, in time, emulate him. I guess one could put my worm farm hobby in that category, but the earnings were more of a necessary income than a hobby by-product. Shirley's one-time hobby of winning homeware products on TV shows could also be put in that class.

Harking back to my 2002 holiday, probably the last I will ever have, I went from Ivan's house back to Bet's for a few days before returning to Sydney. The holiday was successful, in that it got me back on track to living as a single person, albeit as a widower. I will be forever grateful for Ted and Barbara sponsoring that happy time.

However, it is said that a change is as good as a holiday and that was soon to happen after my return to the "Premier State", New South Wales.



On February 13, I submitted an application to the NSW Department of Housing for alternative accommodation. I found the three-bedroom unit in Bringelly Road, Kingswood, too difficult to maintain by myself, and, indeed, too expensive to rent on my single pension. I had also learned that pensioners, particular war veterans, over the age of 80 had a high priority, providing all other criteria, such as financial inhibition, could be met.

Two days later, the department offered me a unit in a block facing the great Western Highway in Kingswood. I had asked for accommodation in the same area, so as to remain close to Wendy and her family. However, I felt some trepidation when about to inspect the offered site, mainly because it's possible noisy highway frontage and because the vicinity was a reputed drug users' hangout. My fears proved well grounded within minutes of my arrival on the scene. I could actually smell drugs in the air, it was noisy, and access to the garage for my little car involved a flight of stairs down to the graffiti ridden area. I had requested a ground floor unit to obviate stress to my knee-joint, which still needed the help of a walking stick.

I was not going to accept this offer, but I had been limited by the department to two choices, so I had to make certain the next offer was acceptable. In declining this first offer, I used the excuse that access to the garage was by stairway, albeit the front access was at ground level. The department's officer-in-charge at Penrith accepted this excuse and reinstated my double chance.

However, I wasn't going to take any chances on being offered such sub-standard units again, so I enlisted the help of my friend, the Member of Federal Parliament and former Mayor of Fairfield, Janice Crosio. With her assistance and the consequent intervention of the State Member for Penrith, the Minister for Community Services, Fay Lo Po, I was offered, within two weeks, a ground floor unit at St Marys. Although this was further away from Wendy, and in a location always regarded as a lame duck suburb of Penrith, I was willing to give it the once over.

I found the recently built block of 14 mostly ground level units in separate groups of two, three and six groups, pleasantly located, facing a park with no busy thoroughfares nearby. Each was a self-contained single bedroom unit, with a small garden area. The only apparent drawbacks were a lack of any garage space and, in my case, a cigarette smoked interior and cigarette-butt stained carpet. I could live with that, hoping open doors and windows would diminish the previous occupant's bequest, whereas I could not have lived with the ever-present drug infested environment of the previous location.

In hindsight, I may have been able to persuade the Housing Department to replace the carpet, as did my neighbour's family to replace the urine "scented" carpet of the previous tenant before their mother took up residence. However, I was so greatly impressed with the surroundings and the general environment, compared with my initial choice, I immediately signed up for my new residence. One huge benefit was the drop in weekly rent from \$195 to \$49.35. Wendy greatly assisted me in negotiating with the department and was the guiding light in arranging the shift from Kingswood to St Marys. The whole family pitched in, with the assistance of the Hollier family, also Carol and Brian Rowlands. One incident stands out in that weekend of March 16-17, 2002. The move was made on the Saturday, and the Sunday was very hot, 36 degrees Celsius, with a forecast of 38 degrees next day. Soon after lunch on the Sunday, Mike turned up with an air-conditioner, which he proceeded to install in the unit lounge.

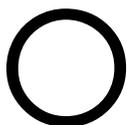
Earlier that Sunday, I had attended the Sunday school's seniors' service for us oldies. I have been going to church regularly, trying to make up, as far as the grandchildren are concerned, for the loss of their grandmother's company in the pew. It has made me realize, far too late, obviously, that I should have accompanied Bet more often to church. Emily appears to miss her grandmother badly. She regularly makes certain that she sits next to me, as much, I think, to comfort me as to be comforted. Emily is that sort of a young girl, very caring, beyond her age, really.



During the next few weeks of settling in to the unit, I started a small garden in the sadly neglected frontage, planting a variety of bulbs. Another much needed improvement was in the television reception. So, I proceeded to arrange for an additional antenna to be applied to the mast in order to receive the ultra high frequency signal from Wollongong as well as the Sydney based signal. By that means, I was able to receive a much improved ABC signal and the hitherto absent SBS signal, the two most important channels as far as I was concerned.

On May 5, 2002, I learned that I had become a great-grandfather for the first time. Judith's daughter, Julia, whom I had met for the first time earlier in the year, had given birth to a daughter, Ella Louise, on April 26. I sent Judith a cheque, jokingly suggesting she buy a silver baby-feeding spoon in lieu of the "silver spoon in the mouth" that the newborn could not inherit from her great-grandfather. I cannot feel as close to my two Victorian families as I should, particularly Judith's because of the greater length of time between our reconciliation. I had met Barbara's two children, Brent and Krista, when they were young and ever since then I had been in contact with them, albeit by birthday and Christmas greetings, mostly. In contrast, I only met one of Judith's three children when she was about to become a mother and I have never met the two sons, now well in to adulthood.

chapter thirty five – fred neale



ur units became the stage for a dramatic event in December, 2002.

Unit 6, upstairs from my unit, was occupied by a Fred Neale, of similar age to me. When I went to bed on the night of the 7th, I thought I heard a tap running. Our units in this self-contained block from Units 3 to 8 are fairly soundproof but for the sound of running water. Next morning, I thought I could still hear running water, as did Edie in No.7, directly across the landing from No.6. Edie was very concerned.

We tried knocking on the locked door and calling out to Fred, to no avail. After consultation with another neighbour, Gwen, we decided to ring the police, which I did. When the police arrived, they repeated our efforts at rousing Fred at the door with no success. We informed them that Fred usually slept with a window open facing his balcony. So one of the men climbed up on to the balcony and pushed up the window.

He immediately called out to "Get an ambulance," and climbed into the unit. Fred was lying unconscious on the floor. The bathroom basin tap was running. Fortunately the plug was not in, because we would have had a flood downstairs. Obviously, Fred had been lying unconscious on the floor all night.

The ambulance took Fred to hospital. The police and ambulance had been able to revive him. However, he never returned to the unit. Three months later, he was dead.

Fred had been a worry to us near neighbours for some months before his collapse. Almost exactly four months before he was taken to hospital, an alarm-like noise had been traced to his unit. It had been puzzling us for weeks until my home care person Pam took the matters into her own hands. Having virtually gate-crashed Fred's door when he opened it, Pam found the sound emanating from his clock radio. It was indeed the actual sleep-waking alarm triggered by the clock setting on the radio.

The discovery had a different triggering-effect on Fred. He immediately accused "people" of gaining access to his unit and "cutting up his clothes". He belligerently invited Gwen (Unit 9) and Edie to inspect the damage. Showing them the obviously well worn and probably

moth-eaten clothing, he belligerently threatened the two of them with being “untrustworthy”, accusing them of causing the damage. When Pam had taken me up to quell the radio alarm, Fred asked me if I was the manager of the units.



Fred would not let the matter rest, threatening to go to the police. When Pam arrived for her next duty in a week's time, she tried to resolve the matter by going to the police herself. Still upset and highly indignant at Fred's accusation, Gwen and Edie had arrived at my unit before Pam left for the police station. They wanted to consult with Pam to obtain her advice as to what action to take. On hearing Pam's proposal to visit the police, they were very happy with this arrangement. They were less happy on Pam's return, having been told by the police to contact Penrith City Council. We ignored this advice, considering it as useless buck-passing. As we eventually found out, Fred had already told the police himself, but at this stage he was bent on making himself pleasant to me.

On the day that Pam had been to the police, he arrived on my doorstep immediately after Pam had left to go to her next home care duty. He had a bundle of religious books and pamphlets in his arms. “I know you go to church, so I thought you would like to have these,” Fred said. They were mostly Jehovah Witnesses or Latter Day Saints type of pamphlets.

“I used to go to a variety of churches,” he said, “but one of the men at the last one thought I was becoming too familiar with his wife, and we had an argument. Now I have become a spiritualist. Only last night, I was visited by several people in spiritual form.” They must, indeed, been of spiritual form, for I would have heard several people going up the stairs and Edie would have mentioned the invasion when we were discussing his problems only an hour or so previously.

“My name is really not Fred Neale, but Robert van Sittart,” Fred said. Trying hard to listen to him, I may have got the spelling of his original name wrong. He was softly spoken, unless he was angrily confused, and my hearing is not the best, even with hearing aids. Fred wore hearing aids, too, but he mostly had them turned off, “to save the batteries”, even when conversing with people.

“My father was a man of great importance in England, but I was legally adopted by a couple who befriended me and they changed my name.” I never did find out how or why he joined his new family.

Fred was really wound up. On reflection, I think he was glad to have found someone to talk to, someone who could listen to his history, which in all probability he had been keeping bottled up too long. I had found throughout my career as a journalist, that once the initial questioning had triggered the response, people wanted to tell their stories. The secret of interviewing was not in the questioning but in the listening.

“As a child, I spent a lot of time in hospitals – actually, I was in hospital for five years. I have been crippled all my life,” he said. There was little evidence of his being crippled, but he did tend to walk with a shuffle. It was probably the reason why he often travelled down the street by means of a child's type of scooter. Apparently he was in the habit of taking the scooter on the train when he visited Penrith. One person I was talking to – I forget who it was – told me he saw Fred riding his scooter in the vicinity of the Log Cabin Hotel, which is on the bank of the Nepean River, three or four kilometres from either Penrith Railway Station or the next station at Emu Plains. According to my unit neighbours, he had previously ridden a very stylish, up-grade, bicycle. That brings me back to his continuing tale:

“On my way to Australia, I rode my bike across France. It took me seventeen days to reach Marseilles, where I caught a boat and travelled to Australia via Tahiti. I rode my bike around the island of Tahiti, but missed the boat which had already left before I completed the trip. The shipping company put me up in a hotel for the night and next day flew me to the next port of call. I arrived in Australia in 1967.”

He had been a coffin-maker in England, with stint of being a "fire guard" during the war, but he landed a job as a fundraiser for crippled children after he arrived in Australia.

This was the gist of his story for that day – a story that I thought had to be taken with a grain of salt. However, his continuing story could possibly need a heaped tablespoon of salt.



Bringing the story back up to the time of Fred's hospitalization, it was left for me to make various arrangements due to the lack of any known relatives or other close friends. Not that I would call myself a close friend. Such arrangements included notification of his doctor, knowing as I did that he attended the same general practitioner, among others, as I did, Dr Brian Richardson. I say "among others" because he had told me visited other doctors when he was dissatisfied with the current one – as the reader may have gathered, he was that sort of a bloke.

Being concerned about Fred's welfare, and not knowing the correct procedure, I rang the Aged Care Assessment Team, as I had obtained very caring, thoughtful advice from their Margaret Phillips when Bet had died. A chap named Johnny said he could not help, that it was up to the hospital social worker.

I was able to see Fred very briefly on the third day after his exit from the unit in the ambulance. On the second day I was allowed to see him, six days after his admission to hospital, I did meet up with a social worker, Betty, who told me a government guardian would have to be appointed to care for Fred.

On my third visit, after church two days later, Fred looked greatly improved, but he had difficulty finding the correct words when talking. He had about 12 attempts before he managed to say "I appreciate your friendliness". I found his keys on his bedside cabinet and was given permission by a senior nursing sister to take them with a view to getting items such as slippers, a dressing gown, and toothbrush from his unit.

A search of his unit discovered many more needed items. These included his hearing aids, with plenty of spare batteries, despite his habit of wearing the aids turned off to save the batteries. His glasses, extra pyjamas, shaving gear and, most importantly, I thought, his brief case, were added to the list. The wooden brief case, which he carried almost always when he left the unit, contained a lot of papers. On a quick glance, the topmost were music scores, but I thought they may have included a birth certificate and bank statements, even a cheque book or credit cards, though I was doubtful that Fred would have such sophisticated financial know-how.

In the week leading up to Christmas, I was in and out of the unit and visiting Fred on almost a daily basis. I defrosted his fridge, which was chock-a-block full of frost, found some medical prescriptions, extra pyjamas and socks that he needed. The nursing staff was unaware that he had no relatives to visit him and said they would make arrangements for his laundry needs. I had found a couple of pairs of dirty pyjamas on the floor of the ward.

I never did find any birth certificate or any reference to Fred's family. So far as I am aware, the hospital staff and, later, the nursing home staff, were similarly unsuccessful.



On Christmas Day, I had a lovely traditional turkey midday dinner, complete with the traditional exchange of presents. Wendy is a great traditionalist. It was a thoroughly enjoyable time before they took off for their holiday home at Woolli. On my way home to my humble abode, I called at the hospital to see Fred. I can't recall if I took him any present. Perhaps I should have. He again repeated his gratitude for visiting him. "Nobody has ever

cared for me, looked after me like you are doing," he said. He was talking better at this stage, but was confused about what was happening to him.

A couple of days later, he was worried about paying the rent for his unit and collecting his pension. I told him I had notified the Housing Department about him being in hospital and there was no problem about his pension. (I'm not sure, but I think I had already discovered his pension was being paid into the bank) I explained that the social worker, Gary, was going to see him after New Year's Day and talk to him about the rent and pension. Fred wanted to make a note about this. Instead of using the pencils and notebook I had given him, he tried to write the note to himself on a handy newspaper. His scribble was unintelligible, so I had to write the note myself, knowing full well that he would never refer to it.

I never found out if the social worker Gary did see Fred. He, Gary, had not appeared by mid-afternoon, when I left the hospital. Fred had been hallucinating, telling me that "he was working on heavy vehicles".

On January 7, my visit to Fred was brought to a sudden end by the hospital arranging for Fred to be given a heart "echo" test. Later in the day, when I had returned from shopping, a Dr Wong rang me. Looking back on my notes, I think he was the same doctor who had given Bet a similar heart test before her hospitalization.

He asked me if I thought Fred could look after himself. I told the doctor, a heart specialist I now realize, about Fred's dementia problem – trying for a matter of minutes to get into Edie's letter box before realizing it was not his own, of accusing Gwen and Edie of cutting up his clothes, of there being no food in his unit.

There was, to my mind, a strange consequence to this phone call. The next time I attended the surgery of my own GP, Dr Brian Richardson, he apologized for the call. I am not too sure of the timing, but I think the apology was about Dr Wong's call. In any case, I got the impression that Dr Richardson was of the opinion that my relationship with Fred was much closer than mere friendship. Fred, himself, had made what could be interpreted as subtle hints that such a relationship would not be unwelcome "Do you ever feel the need for a partner?" or words to that effect. At the time, I let it pass, thinking it was his dementia talking. However, when he became ill, my concentration on caring for him was only initiated because there was no other person making any similar moves.

Apparently there were people concerned enough about his well being to send him 'get-well' cards. Fred was worried that he was unable to send 'thank-you' responses, especially to the 25 members of the Nepean Historical Society who signed the society's card. I told him I would pass on his thanks to the guiding principal of the society, Jean Stephens, when next I saw her at church.

On the next visit, Fred informed me that a doctor had mentioned "tents" and a "camp" but that he had not been "precise". My interpretation of this garbled message was that Fred would shortly be going into "rehabilitation". This proved to be a correct analysis because two days later I had to trudge to the rehabilitation ward, a "route march" away in the North Block. The nurses told me that Fred had a fall the previous day, which Fred, in his own inimical words, by way of explanation, said: "I attribute the collapse due to constipation".

There may have been some connection, at that, because a couple of days later he complained to me that there had been "much blood" when he last went to the toilet. He said he would be a week more in hospital, at least, waiting for "the blood to dry up."

Two days later, he told me "A lady came to see me. She is arranging for someone to care for me." Seeking an explanation of the 'care', I called at the nursing station as I was leaving. The nursing manager asked me if I had time to talk to the social worker. I had already found her card on Fred's bedside cabinet, so I knew her name was Jude Wilford. I had a long talk with her – one of many I would have in the future – the upshot of which was that Fred was

being booked into Mountain View Nursing Home at Mulgoa Road, Penrith. It was – and is still – adjoining Penrith Rugby League Club, Panthers, not that Fred would have wanted to enjoy the club's facilities. He was not that way inclined.

Jude asked me if I could be at Fred's unit later in the week while she packed up Fred's belongings. Fred was transferred from Nepean District Hospital to Mountain View Nursing home on Friday, January 24. During that afternoon, I watched, at Jude's request, while she packed Fred's gear. She suggested I retained the spare set of keys, as St. Vincent de Paul may be along later to claim Fred's furniture. Jude borrowed two of my suitcases to contain Fred's music, writing manuscripts and similar paperwork.

Early the next week, I paid my first visit to Fred in Mountain View. It is a very large building, housing 92 patients. Two different members of the managerial nursing staff asked – almost begged – me to provide as many details of Fred's history as I could manage. I co-operated as well as I could, which did not clarify the situation a great deal.

Fred was still worried about his finances – his "obligations", as he put it. I had found him listening to a concert the nursing home had arranged for the patients. After listening to the concert for a few minutes with him, Fred wanted me to leave with him for a "private talk". I think this was the occasion when he raised the matter of finances. In reply to my pertinent questions, Fred said "Oh, I've got money!" As I was to find out much later he certainly did 'have money'.



Before St. Vincent de Paul came for Fred's furniture, I told Mike and Wendy about Fred's scooter still being in the unit. Mike was interested and offered \$50 for it. In consultation with Jude, his offer was accepted and I eventually paid the \$50 to the office of the director of nursing at Mountain View. I scored, with Jude's blessing, Fred's kitchen stool he had used as a stand for his small television.

The nursing home installed a TV for him, but I had a difficult job explaining to him the method of changing channels.

On Sunday, February 8, 2003, I went to see Fred after church, little knowing it would be the last time I was to see him. He was watching the tennis, but asked me to change over to the cricket, which we watched together.

At 4.30am the next day, I received a phone call from the nursing home, advising that Fred had died in his sleep. This started off a busy day of phone calls, the main ones being to Jean Stephens, of the Nepean Historical Society, who was, like me, shocked at the news. Jude Wilford, the hospital social worker was aware of Fred's demise, and said she would advise me of the funeral arrangements. The deputy director of nursing at Mountain View, Debbie, rang requesting information about Fred's banking arrangements, his will and/or solicitor.

Unfortunately, I did not know the answers to her questions. Later, after I had returned from a 2pm physio appointment Debbie rang back to advise me that Fred had sufficient funds in the bank to cover the cost of the funeral. (I was to find out months later just how much this advice was an understatement). Debbie also told me the funeral would be held at Pine Grove on Thursday, February 13, under the control of Sydney Funerals.

After a busy morning the next day – visiting my doctor, Penrith Surgical Supplies, and doing my regular Tuesday morning shopping at Penrith Coles – I had three telephone messages waiting on my answering machine. Firstly, Jude Wilford telling me that the funeral would be at the North Chapel of Pine Grove at 10.00am. Then two calls from Jean Stephens, the first, telling me that she would be giving the eulogy at the funeral and, on the second, saying that Debbie was looking through Fred's papers in an endeavour to find a will.

All of the stress caught up with me on the Wednesday, forcing me to go to bed at 6.30pm. I slept soundly until 2.30am, when I was widely awake. So I got out of bed at 3am, did some ironing and watering of the garden and prepared myself for the funeral.

Jean Stephens managed to deliver a good eulogy, considering the little we knew of Fred's history. There were only seven of us mourners at the funeral – three from the historical society, three from Lewers Gallery in Penrith – I cannot remember what the connection was with the gallery – and myself as the sole representation of the unit residents.



Two months later – on April 17, to be exact – Jude rang, offering to give me Fred's writings, knowing I had been a journalist and could be interested reading them. I accepted the offer. Jude dropped the stack of paperwork off on her way home that afternoon. It was all packed into Fred's wooden briefcase and a very large cardboard container. I still have the briefcase, which I kept as a memento of all the close contact I had with him. I refrain from calling it friendship – he was hardly a friendly chap – but I felt great sympathy for him, alone and seriously ill, as he was.

The writings consisted of biographical stories and poems. The poetry was quite good, in my estimation. The biography I am inclined to describe as 'stories', although they may well have been 'fact', but we journalists always refer our news articles as 'stories'.

As I have mentioned, the briefcase is still with me, but the entire writings are not, as I have passed them on to Jean Stephens. So, I am unable to refer to them at first hand, but I made a note in my diary the six days after I received them "Fred's writings are heavy going at times. He never uses a simple word where a more pretentious word would suffice," with tongue in cheek meaning suffice in Fred's opinion. As an example, my diary entry quoted "at the end of his bicycle ride to Alice Springs, he became 'loquacious' where the more simple word 'talkative' would in my opinion, have been more appropriate."

Those bicycle rides – I want to believe those truly newsworthy epics actually happened. Apart from his early ride through France, where he allegedly caught, at Marseilles, the boat to Australia, riding around the island of Tahiti on the way, he writes of his ride from Sydney to Perth and a second ride from Adelaide to Darwin.

Through my reading, I have had glimpses of the great touring bicycle clubs of England and their adventures. It may have been in-built in Fred's psyche. According to my unit neighbours, he did have a magnificent bike, worthy of such trips. His papers included a photo of the bike-trailer combination he aptly describes, which looks capable of lasting those thousands of miles.

What inclines me to scepticism is that he, a self-declared life-long cripple, was physically able for that gruelling punishment without making headlines along the way. I realize he was a somewhat self-effacing character and may not have looked for any kudos concerning his courageous efforts, but surely, those efforts would have been noted by enough fellow travellers to become newsworthy. Just as surely, I would have seen some reference during my addictive news watching and news gathering employment. There were no cuttings of newspapers among his papers to verify his trips.

I would dearly love to believe the accounts of his bike rides across Australia. If true, they are heroic individual efforts. However, I think I have indicated the powers of his imagination. Fred would have been able to describe the Nullarbor and the towns he would have had to pass through from his reading. What does give some credence to his descriptions is the detail of the caravan park at the end of his Perth ride. I greatly regret that I was unable to get Fred to talk of his life while he was fit and able to speak clearly without his dementia getting in the way.

His story, too, of joining a suburban symphony orchestra is open to question, judging from his violin playing in his unit. It was always tuneful, mostly renditions of 'Danny Boy' but there were no shades of Beethoven, Mozart, Bruch or Kreisler. Here, again, the dementia may have got in the way.



Fred's story comes to a conclusion five months after his death. On July 1, 2003, the new resident of Unit 6, Eve came down to me with a letter she had received in her letterbox. It was addressed to the 'Executor of Fred Neale's Estate'.

Eve had opened the letter and did not know what to do with it. It was from the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, enclosing a statement of a fixed deposit of \$10,000, which was due to expire on July 11.

I rang the hospital social worker Jude Wilford, who suggested I visit the Penrith branch of the bank, ringing her while at the bank. The next day, I did ring the bank, eventually being put through to a lady named Sandy. She told me she could not discuss Fred's deposit because of the Privacy Act., but would ring the bank's Deceased Clients' Department in Melbourne. Sandy rang me back later that same day to say that all future mail should be directed to the Melbourne department.

I was advised by the Melbourne department, through Sandy, that I would need a solicitor if I still wanted to be involved in Fred's estate. I declined to be involved. For some reason or other, Jude Wilford was greatly impressed with my decision to forfeit any right to Fred's estate. Jude, immediately, said that if I was ever in Nepean District Hospital, and needed help, to contact her. (Strangely, I was in that hospital in 2006, needing help, but I could not remember Jude's name!)

I told my accountant friend Kevin Houseman, when next I saw him, of the possibility of becoming involved in Fred's estate. He said I could have declared an interest in the said estate. It would not have made any difference to my reaction – I wanted no part of it.

chapter thirty six – roses

A week after Fred's story concluded, I started my second attempt at making a rose garden, albeit a midget rose garden.

The first attempt had been many years ago at Horsley Park, when Wendy was still with us, possibly in her last years at high school or at least in her early years of employment, first as a cadet photographer, then as a librarian. I use the time reference deliberately, due to Wendy's yen for strawberries, with which I under-planted the roses. Wendy used to dwell on the first crop of strawberries, knowing that Christmas was not far away. At Horsley Park, too, Bet used to dwell on the first appearance of the freesias which I had planted in the low bank of what would become a creek much further downstream.

I have always been interested in gardening, as witness my gladioli growing at Emu Plains to earn an extra few bob. Earlier too, I became a sort of handy-man gardener when I was recovering from the nervous breakdown coinciding with my first marriage problems. However, I really never had the time to devote to gardening, particularly after I became a journalist, with the time constraints associated with such a career.

Now, in 2003, I was alone and settled in at Little Chapel Street, with a bare garden frontage, with nobody else inclined to take care of it. I had an opportunity to indulge my gardening instincts. I had cared for a couple of roses in front of the unit at Bringelly Road, Kingswood, one of which was a highly scented yellow shrub, which I eventually found out was named Freesia.

Realizing rose-planting time was fully upon us, and wanting the best, I ordered by phone from the leading rose nursery, Swanes, six bare-rooted plants, including Freesia. At the time, I considered six roses would be most I could fit across the frontage. The five others were Oklahoma (dark red), Blue Moon (mauve), Double Delight (variegated red and cream), Gold Medal (deep golden), and Aotearoa (pink, with a name which I understand is the Maori name for New Zealand). I have since added two more Angel Face (purple) and First Prize (pink), both of which had been recommended to me.

I ordered the first five on July 7, 2003, and received them by post on July 21. I planted them immediately, taking most of the day to do so. I am very glad that I followed Swanes' instructions to the letter.

To complete those instructions I needed Lucerne mulch named Gro Cubes. (My laptop does not recognize the word "Lucerne" – it wants to capitalize it to translate it to the Swiss canton capital – so I should have used the American term "alfalfa" for the same fodder crop, but I won't do that, staying with "Lucerne").

After spending a couple of hours on the 'phone, I could not find a nursery that sold Gro Cubes. I rang Swanes explaining the problem, only to find such mulch was only available from their own nursery. However, I was told that an equivalent product, called "Earth Cubes" was available from a firm called "Makers" of Llandilo, near St Marys. So I rang Makers, only to find they were wholesalers and did not sell retail. They recommended a Penrith nursery, Johns, from whom I ordered four bags, which would take a few days to arrive from Makers. I eventually received them a week later at a cost of \$22.50 each.

I have gone into such great detail because the mulch eventually proved of untold value, well worth the cost of time and money. I give Earth Cubes the credit for the outstanding health of the rose bushes and the beauty of the blooms, which have earned me the record of having "the best roses in St Marys" from passers-by. Those same cubes have given me more of the original run-around over the years. After Johns Nursery closed down, I had to go to a nursery at Emu Plains. Again, that nursery closed down and I was forced further afield, up the mountains to Glenbrook.

In the meantime, I acquired a video by Ben Swane on "Planting and Pruning Roses", in which he advises the use of baled Lucerne hay (the laptop is back in Switzerland again). He, Ben Swane, reiterates two or three times the value of this mulch. He leaves no doubt that Lucerne hay is of the utmost importance to the health of rose bushes. Therefore, I had delivered two bales of Lucerne hay from Mamre Produce at Erskine Park.

Unfortunately, in my enthusiasm and the thought of restricting weed growth, I applied it too heavily to take advantage of another of Ben Swane's 'musts'. This involves an application of organic fertilizer called 'Organic Life'. From the day of planting, I used Organic Life, spreading it around the bushes every four to six weeks.



I had a keen rose fancier and grower as a neighbour. Her name is Maureen, who has about 30 or more roses in her front garden, of usual house block size. Maureen worked at the huge Bunnings Hardware Store, Penrith branch. Knowing that I have no transport, except the ride-on scooter, she offered to purchase any horticulture needs I required and which is available at Bunnings. In this way, she helped me to acquire sprays, fertilizer and mulch.

Maureen has a granddaughter who was then about eight years old. On a recent visit to Nanny, the little lass enquired: "Are you having a competition growing roses with that man up the street, Nan?" That would have been no contest, considering Nan's quantity of good roses.

chapter thirty seven – “toby two”

A

cquisition of the ride-on scooter mentioned in the previous chapter was the result of failing physical health during the years since the rose planting at Little Chapel Street. The health failure was mainly in the bone and joint structure, for I had another knee replacement and a hip replacement.

First of these operations was the right knee in early May 2000, the second was the left knee on July 27, 2004 and the last, the left hip, on October 7, 2005. Dr Rami Sorial did the knees and Dr Warren Kuo did the hip. Dr Sorial did a magnificent job on the knees. I was in a rehab hospital with a patient in the same ward on whom Dr Sorial did a replacement to a hip broken in six places in a car crash. We both reckoned Dr Sorial was ‘the best’. The left leg has been a bit stiff since the hip job, but I guess that is understandable with two joints having been replaced.

As a result of all these joint replacements, added perhaps to residual effects of the stroke in 1999, I decided to give up driving the car. After making enquiries from Veterans Affairs Department of the Federal Government, I found that I was possibly eligible to be provided with a ride-on electric scooter. Supported by a strong recommendation from my doctor, Brian Richardson, DVA (Veterans Affairs) came good on April 27, 2006.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, Bet had named our latest car “Toby”, so I called the scooter ‘Toby’ too, which became ‘Toby Two’, as in Mark 2.

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Probably the most influential factor in my decision to stop car driving was the lasting effect of being diagnosed with Golden Staph (*Staphylococcus aureus*). This had resulted in a rushed transfer to a single ward two or three days after the hip operation, and having my 86th birthday in isolation.

The hip operation resulted from a so-called ‘spontaneous fracture’, rather than a fall, as is common with people, male and female, of my age at the time. I went to bed with no hint of such a problem and woke up with a sore left leg. This happened on a Tuesday morning so I went shopping as usual, thinking the pain would possibly ease with movement as my leg warmed up.

The pain increased in severity, to the point where I had to rest at every seat out of the shopping centre. When I reached the car (Toby Mark One), a woman saw my difficulty and helped me to transfer the shopping bags from the trolley into the car. To enable me to drive home from Penrith to St Marys, I had to keep my left foot on the clutch pedal to change gears. Otherwise, I could not move my leg fast enough from the floor to the clutch pedal. On arriving home, I immediately rang the doctor, but he had gone home for the day. He made a home visit to my unit the next day and prescribed Voltaren.

I was due to have a driving test to renew my licence the next day, but was obviously not fit enough to do so, despite the Voltaren easing the pain somewhat. Exactly a week after the pain developed, again on a Tuesday, I requested another home visit by Dr Richardson. He prescribed an X-ray and said he would write to the Roads Transport Association, requesting the driving test to be deferred.

Two days later, on the Thursday morning before Wendy was due to drive me up to Penrith for the X-rays to be taken, my grandson Brent Franklin rang me from Melbourne with bad news. My former wife, Brent's grandmother, Melva, had died during the previous night. I had a letter ready for posting to daughter Barbara, so I added my condolences and wrote a letter of condolence to her sister Judith.

Wendy picked me up at 2pm and drove me up to have the X-rays taken, me still dressed in pyjamas. When Wendy went to the desk to pick up the X-rays, she was told to take me, immediately, across the street to Nepean General Hospital. I had been walking around for the last 10 days with a broken hip. When next I saw my GP, Dr Richardson, he was amazed that I had been able to do so.

A similar feat of endurance, with an almost exact replica of cause, was to affect my sister Betty Vanstan some three months later. She had planned to cook the Christmas dinner, but was in so much pain that she had to ask her daughter Kay to do it. She had thought the pain was due to a recurring injury from a car crash many years ago. One of her other daughters, Helen, rang me to say Betty had been undergone an operation for a hip replacement on Friday, January 13, 2006. So, Betty had outdone me, walking around with a broken hip for 20 days, double the time of my achievement. Her doctors based her injury on a 'spontaneous fracture'. Maybe we both had a genetic problem, or maybe it was because we both had not drunk milk since we were children, simply because we did not like the taste of it. That possibly caused a lack of calcium, leading to softening of bones.



As mentioned earlier, I blame the loss of my driving licence on contracting golden staph, inasmuch as I seemed to lose the motivation necessary to apply for and sit my delayed driving test. The loss of motivation extends to my life in general, even to the lack of interest in finishing these memoirs. I am not aware if that disease affects most sufferers in a similar fashion, but I certainly sense it has created a great hole in my life.

However, it did not stop me from trying to get alternative means of transport, albeit restricted in range, speed and all-weather performance. I knew I would miss the convenience of having a car, but the knowledge was not sufficient to counter the lack of motivation and lack of desire to get out on the roads again. It was almost as if I had a fear of driving again, although I would not admit it to myself.

I was quite prepared to purchase a new scooter privately. Ultimately, Veterans Affairs, perhaps influenced by Dr Richardson's strong recommendation, saved me from forking out \$4,050. Not that I would probably paid that much myself, opting for a more modest model. Perhaps I would have been better to settle for a cheaper model paid for by myself, because the top-of-the line model provided by the government department proved to be a 'bomb'. It was an Auriga, manufactured by Invacare, the model I would have bought goes by the name Shoprider.

Apparently, the problem was in the electronic circuit. A couple of days after I had received it on April 20, 2006, I noticed the left rear turning indicator lamp was not working. This was only a minor fault, rectified by the scooter agents, Active Mobility Systems (AMS), on May 9, but it was a precursor of problems to come. The first major fault occurred on June 13, when the multitude of dashboard on/off indicator lights lit up, flashing like a Christmas tree. After supposedly being fixed by the service mechanic, the Christmas tree effect happened again on June 23. Finally, AMS took Toby Two away the next day to repair it in their own service station.

I was not to see Toby Two again until September 4, a matter of 10 weeks. I was without any form of transport for three weeks, until AMS provided a courtesy replacement. I promptly capsized that vehicle by driving it off a kerb down to roadside level, pinning my leg between the scooter and the road surface. I was rescued from that predicament by a park gardener, no worse for wear, only bruising.

The delay involved in the repair could not be fully blamed on AMS. As I suspected, it was a financial problem between the Federal Government (the Department of Veterans' Affairs) and AMS. Whether it was a delay in receiving the initial \$4,050 full payment or payment for repairs, I am not aware, but I suspect it was the former. The government's economic reputation, I think, is falsely based on tardiness of payment, which could drive small businesses to the wall.

So I was the innocent victim caught in the middle of a power play.

In any case, the Christmas tree flashing lights erupted on the circuit board erupted once again on October 9. This time, I decided to wait and see if it would settle down. The flashing light stopped almost immediately, but the dashboard lights stayed alight for four days. Then, on October 13, all dashboard lights went off, except for the low gear indicator, which had been par for the course since the first major fault on June 13.

chapter thirty eight – fishing

must not finish this saga without re-emphasizing my early love of fishing and of how that love developed later in life, towards and after retirement.

In the early chapters, I told of how my grandfather John Pellas took Ivan and me fishing in his dinghy. I owe him a great debt for thus instilling my love of what I regarded at that time to be great adventures. I cannot, of course, repay him, but that experience led me to try and repeat it with my own grandson, Ricky. He amazed me with the speed at which he learned the art of casting a lure. Unfortunately, I was unable to take him fishing more than a couple of times. Maybe he, too, will develop a greater love of fishing later in life.

I rarely went fishing without at least catching one fish, even if it was only a lowly mullet or a carp – the lowest of the low – and even if my time was restricted to an hour. However, it was amazing the number of times my catch was restricted to only one, regardless of any extended length of time. Be that as it may, I always enjoyed the time I had a fishing rod – or even a simple line with a couple of hooks attached – in my hand.

Maybe it was because my formative years were lived in the country, I have always been a freshwater fisherman. My ideal eating fish has always been the greatly scorned redfin perch, as caught in Harcourt Reservoir. Known also as English perch, the vast majority of freshwater fishermen rate them minutely higher than that other introduced species, the forever unanimously damned – even by me – European carp. Though full of bones, I still regard the redfin perch the sweetest tasting fish, beating the next best, flathead, by a large margin.

Before I delve deeper into my freshwater experiences, I do not want to leave the impression that I disdain saltwater fishing, I have never been deep-sea fishing, but I have sporadic acquaintances with saltwater. Once, when my doctor ordered me to have a break from journalism, I fished a few times at Terrigal and Avoca Beach, catching my nominal single rock cod on each occasion. Again, when living with, or next door to, Bet's father at Narrabeen, I fished for blackfish in Narrabeen Lake.

But the daddy of all my saltwater experiences was an all-night sitting on Broken Bay. It was when I first arrived in Sydney.

I could not get a newspaper job because of the journo's strike and I got a job at the motor-accessories firm of Westcott-Hazell. The chief clerk of the buying office, Col, organized the hiring of a boat at Brooklyn, of which we took possession on the Saturday afternoon. We headed off for an island offshore of which Col assured us good fishing could be enjoyed during our planned all-night stint. Maybe it was because the rest of the six of us were more interested in drinking beer I was the only successful fisherman. Yes, I caught my one fish, a catfish, which had spiked my hand with its spine when I hauled it in.

Catfish had a habit of adding injury to their captor in my experience. I soon recovered from the spiking on Broken Bay, but it was painful for a day or two. The very next fish I caught was also a catfish and resulted in me falling into the Colo River some 30 miles due west of Broken Bay. I slipped on the smooth grassy riverbank and ended up in the water with the fish. I had to call Bet from our nearby camp site to help haul me out because I had a leg jammed between the bank and a tree root, or it may have been a fallen tree; I don't remember which. (Maybe the reader can backtrack to an earlier reference to this episode and personally discover the answer. I make no apology for the repetition, for this camping holiday was one of the happiest times Bet and I spent together. Strangely, the close walls of the tent did not seem to trigger Bet's claustrophobia in the same way as latter trips in a caravan. In hindsight, maybe a tent-camping trip around Australia may have been the answer to my frustrated plans for such a trip with a caravan in my retirement. Maybe we could have enjoyed such scenes, also at the same Colo River site, as the lyrebird strutting his stuff and calling his mimics of man-made sounds. But it was not to be).



The frequency of my fishing experiences resumed a similar pattern to my boyhood times with Grandpa Pellas through my friendship with Dave Watkins. He was in charge of cleaning at the Fairfield City Council buildings while I was the council's public relations officer. Fishing was Dave's life, probably still is if he is still with us, fit and able. Our connections these days are via Christmas cards. I quite often had conversations with him on council meeting nights and the nights, quite often, when I found it necessary to work late to cope with the pressure of my duties.

You could not have a conversation with Dave without the subject matter turning to fishing within minutes. Like me, he was strictly a freshwater fisherman. We 'clicked' from the outset, despite differing opinions about the value of redfin perch. Our friendship ripened to the point of Dave inviting me to join him on a trip to Lake Keepit on the Namoi River in north-east New South Wales, between Gunnedah and Tamworth, with the smaller town of Manilla the closest. The invitation included Bet as company for his wife, also called Betty. The two Betty's did not fish but they enjoyed card games, cribbage and 500 – as Dave and I did. After the day's fishing and the evening meal, Bet and I would join the Watkins in their caravan for a couple of hours of cards before Bet and I retired to our own caravan.

The daily catch of yellow-belly (golden perch) was good by my standards, up to a dozen each. However, Dave always lamented that it was nothing like his trips in the past, when he and other companions caught up to 60 daily. This became a familiar theme throughout the many trips we made together- the fishing in times of yore was increasingly embellished as the years wore on. He just may have had a justifiable point, as statistics record diminishing stocks, particularly so far as native fish are concerned. Anyway, he still had sufficiently large enough catches to put by some filleted fish in the freezer to tide them over at home between trips.

The off-cuts from the filleting went towards baiting our shrimp traps to provide us with the ideal bait, as we judged it, for our angling. In these early trips, we did little trolling with lures. That came later, when the target was trout, rather than yellow-belly, even then, we still mainly angled with shrimps for bait.

Dave had maps of the lakes and reservoirs we fished, showing the route of the original rivers and watercourses before they were dammed. We mostly tied the boat – all of our fishing

was done from the boat – to a dead tree on the edge of the river. Later, learning from Dave, I gained my own maps when I eventually became the proud owner of my own boat. That was still a few trips in the future. At the two main fishing spots – Keepit and Lake Burrinjuck – there were drowned trees scattered throughout the dammed up water.

On the second trip with Dave, also to Keepit, Bet did not accompany me. However, another of Dave's friends brought his wife. They set up camp in a rugged square army tent, not far from me. Dave, as usual had his caravan almost at the water's edge. Within a couple of days, the weather deteriorated rapidly. Gale force winds blew up and completely wrecked the couple's strong tent. No alternative accommodation being available, I offered to put them up in my caravan. Being a four-berthed van, I gave them the double bed, which could be screened off from the rest of the van, and I took one of the single beds. My memory of this trip is very hazy, but I remember sharing the caravan with them for a couple of days, I think they had a young child with them, too. In any case, my failure to remember any fishing seems to imply that the weather completely ruined that trip, with the assumed result of the lot of us packing up and returning home.



Of all the dams I have fished in my latter years – Keepit, Wyangala, Burrinjuck, Copeton, Hume, Eildon – Lake Burrinjuck at Wee Jasper on the Goodradigbee River arm, remains my favourite. (Harcourt Reservoir, with its bags of redfin perch in my younger days will always remain my very best favourite). My first glance of Wee Jasper, from the heights above the valley before I wound my way down to the river, remains with me as a visual image to this day. The image is equal to that of the Harcourt valley stored away in my memory, and that is saying something! My Dad had a friend who had travelled the world, and he used to say that the scene from the head of the Harcourt valley was equal to the best in the world. Strangely, I tend to agree with him.

Lake Burrinjuck is built on the confluence of three rivers: Murrumbidgee – the main one, on which the wall is constructed, the Yass, and the aforementioned Goodradigbee. I have never travelled far up the Murrumbidgee or Yass, but what I saw there had scenic possibilities. However, the image of Wee Jasper remains more than enough for me. In those days – the 70's and 80's – the village comprised a general store/post office/petrol station near the bridge, an adjoining shop selling home-made sheepskin products (ugg-boots, jackets and, I think Akubra style hats), school, hall (both tiny) and a caravan park/ camping area with its office selling basic food and fishing gear.

Dave showed me the homestead, upstream of the bridge, where our renowned storyteller Andrew "Banjo" Paterson was wont to stay in his travels up and down to the Snowy River. If memory serves me rightly (it's fading fast daily now), the homestead, as Dave tells the story, belonged to someone concerned with publishing Paterson's stories and poems. Could it be Archibald, of the *Bulletin* and Archibald Prize fame?

Dave also mentioned that Rupert Murdoch had as large rural property, a sheep station if I remember correctly, in the Cavan area midway between Yass and Wee Jasper. So, the region must have proved popular to publishers. A little nearer Wee Jasper, on the opposite side of the road to Rupert, the late Princess Diana's family had a property. The Yass area, in general, is home to some very wealthy property owners, mostly of sheep stations. The huge effigy of a ram bordering the Hume Highway at Goulburn could well apply as well to Yass, just down the road a bit.

Therefore, it is appropriate that Dave had made himself at home in a sheep property – it could hardly be called a station – at Wee Jasper. Before I came on to the scene, Dave had been making regular trips to Wee Jasper, at least once a year, possibly two or three times annually. In the course of that time, he had talked himself into a caravan site within 50 metres of the homestead's backyard fence. It was just far enough away to stop the noise of his mobile petrol-driven electric generator from disturbing the family. Into the bargain, Dave parked his mobile freezer on the home's back veranda so the filleted fish he would be

taking home did not thaw whilst the mobile generator was out of action during the time he was out on the lake fishing.

The home had all the modern cons, including a septic tank, but for us campers it was a 100 metre hike to a hole-in-the-ground backyard 'dunny'. One of the first duties after setting up camp was to visit this establishment with a flaming (literally) tightly rolled up newspaper and incinerate the redback spiders under the seat before dropping the flare into the hole as a further safeguard.

When I first went to Wee Jasper, I already had my own caravan, but I had to share Dave's boat. So we each had our own sleeping accommodation, but occasionally we ate together in Dave's caravan. In particular, this happened when Dave outscored me in the day's catch, which, in the early trips, was mostly the situation. On later trips, after I had obtained my own boat, Dave brought along long-time fishing mate, Bert Kemp, who shared both his boat and caravan.



Like all fishermen, Dave had his favourite spots on the lake. I suspect I would never have learned these spots had I not been in the boat with him. On one early trip we were tied hard up against a sheer rock face, taking advantage of a small tree growing out of the rock to hitch a rope on one end and a broken protruding rock splinter as a bollard on the other end. As well as the boat rod, I was using a hand line, which from force of boyhood habit on Harcourt Reservoir, I was jigging up and down, tempting the fish.

Lo and behold, a much-prized – in Dave's estimation – Macquarie perch was tempted. I'll never forget the expression on David's face, or the verbal expression minutes later. How dare this Johnnie-cum-lately hook the catch of the season! One who did not know the value put on it by a veteran freshwater fisherman such as Dave.

It was a much smaller fish than I had caught from my Grandpa's boat two at a time. Granted, it was a perch, but a lot darker than the red fin perch at Harcourt and the golden perch I had caught at Keepit. I took it home and gave it to Wendy, who I think, did not appreciate it because it was too bony. She does not take after her Dad in that respect, not having been brought up on red fin at Harcourt.

On one of my early trips to Burrinjuck, I decided to take Wendy for a weekend visit. I think it probably was only the second time I had been to Wee Jasper. I was so entranced with the scenery, I wanted to soak up the atmosphere by myself or in the company of a kindred spirit. (If Dave had been impressed with the scenic beauty, at first, he had long ago seen it as only the site for fishing prowess.) So fishing, this trip, was only a secondary consideration.

We camped upstream of the lake headwaters on the Goodradigbee arm. The river, at this time of the season – early summer, I think – was only a trickling brook within five kilometres of the lake. When I say 'camped', we slept on a mattress in the station wagon (the white Ford, or it could have been the red Ford predecessor) and used the tailboard as a dining table. We were at a camping site, with fireplaces and toilets, although rather primitive.

Wendy, at 10 years old, was always fascinated with running water, so she spent all her spare time building 'dams' with small rocks in the trickling river. With a rod in my hand, just in case, we both went for a hike up the Goodradigbee. We met an old codger coming down the track, who warned us about the possibility of meeting snakes. We did not go very far, not seeing any fanged villains or catching any fish, but I, for one, enjoyed the bush and the isolation from care and worry. I hope Wendy cherished the two days in which she had the undivided attention of her Dad. Wendy was always Dad's girl up to this stage, but she became more of a Mum's girl after reaching her teenage years, as is only natural, I suppose.

On the way home I called at a service station to replenish the petrol. I've always thought it was at Tarcutta, but it couldn't have been, unless we had made a sightseeing tour to the south of Yass, where the Wee Jasper road takes off from the Hume Highway. I can visualize the Tarcutta service station now, downhill from the motel where we used to stay overnight when returning with Mum to Victoria after visits to us. I well remember Wendy being with us on one of these occasions, because she made a beeline to the swimming pool almost before the car had stopped rolling.

Down the years, my mind's eye has fastened on the Tarcutta service station as the scene of the following drama, minor drama as it may now seem, but serious as it seemed then. While I was getting the petrol, Wendy said she wanted to go to the toilet, so I guided her in the right direction. When I had finished filling the tank with petrol and paying for it, I waited for Wendy to put in an appearance. The wait got longer and longer, until I started fearing she had been abducted, uncommon as that would have been in those days, different to the current environment. Rushing into the women's toilet, I discovered my daughter calmly struggling with the door lock, apparently in no panic whatsoever. After climbing over the wall and releasing the lock, I commended Wendy on her practical attitude. Somewhat scornfully, she said: "Dad, I knew you would come eventually". That was something like a coming of age between father and daughter, changing from a degree of panic on my part to a not unpleasant ending to the trip.



If catching a trout on a fly gives a greater thrill than catching one on a spinner trailing a boat – and realistically it must do – then it's no wonder fly-fishermen spend hours trying to entice a rainbow to take the bait. I have tried the first method a few times without success or patience, but have had the thrill of success in the second method. Fly fishing demands expertise. Lure fishing behind a boat at almost idling speed demands some skill, but nowhere near the same high standard. There is no greater thrill, in my mind, than a trout, be it rainbow or brown, leaping high out of the water at the end of a line.

After sharing a boat with Dave for two or three trips, I decided to buy my own boat. The Trading Post newspaper provided a lucky medium to do this, with the result I ended up with an immaculate 12 feet 'tinny', including all the accessories- 9.9hp Mercury outboard engine, oars, and anchor – the lot. I attached high-grade roof racks to the Ford XW Falcon station wagon, much to Bet's disgust, and invented an ingenious way to fasten the boat atop the vehicle. From thereon into the future, I was independent of anybody, choosing my own fishing spots. I made a few individual forays on my own to new dams.

Piloting my own boat necessitated acquiring maps of the waterways to avoid being stranded atop of a submerged tree. (Bear in mind this period of my life was free of the more recent devastating droughts, which revealed the location of the trees anyway). Dave had tutored me on the location of the original tree-free rivers forming the basis of the dams, but now I was my own pilot, I was able to further explore courses of the rivers and creeks outside our previously routine routes.

Even with the extra navigational aids of the maps, I ended up, on one occasion, stranded on top of a tree. Would you believe I did this within 100 metres of the small creek which we were using as our home harbor, just down the hill from our campsite? No matter how hard I revved the outboard, forward and reverse, no matter how much I rocked the boat, I could not move it. Fortunately, Dave and his mate were fishing within sight about 200 metres away. With a lot of arm waving and yahooping, I was able to attract their attention. They ungraciously forsook their prime fishing spot and were able to tow me to clear water.

Now, my fishing days are well and truly over. My boat, outboard motor and three-tiered tackle box are located at the Allan family holiday cottage on Woolli beach. As I write these final words of the fishing chapter, during the first week in February, 2008, it is possible that Mike and/or members of his family are in the boat on Woolli Woolli (also known as Little) River. May they long continue to enjoy it.

chapter thirty nine – final thoughts?

The question mark applies more to ‘thoughts’ than to ‘finality’, though they are linked.

I have reached the stage where my thoughts stray wildly and often, so it requires an effort of willpower to return those thoughts to the task in hand.

My brother Ivan often tells the story of asking himself the question, while doing a routine orchard task in childhood “Does anyone ever stop thinking?” I come closest to it when completely relaxed, such as while fishing or listening to classical music. At the present stage of my life, I am apt to stop a routine chore and let my mind wander for minutes on end to various matters totally unconnected with that routine. They are not fantasies, but they could be memories of past events, plans for future events, or thoughts of current family events. Whatever they are, when I come back to earth I wonder where the time has gone.

I realize that such episodes are common to a lot of people, but not on an almost hourly basis, as is the case with me. I have just done it again. When I came to, I had just typed three or four words in italic. My wandering mind and fingers apparently had shifted the mouse up to click on to the italic symbol.

There is, also, a touch of Alzheimer’s possibly creeping in to my psyche. A few days ago, I was thinking about something that involved our recently deposed prime minister. For the life of me, I could not remember his name...the name of the man who had ruled our lives for the last 11 years and eventually tried to ruin the lives of workers with industrial laws which would have taken us back way beyond the birth of the industrial revolution.

In the space of four months since his election defeat, I was at a loss of recalling his name. Of course, it may have been a case of wishful obliteration from memory, but I think not. In any case, I had to root out a leftover election pamphlet to retrieve the name of John Howard, thankfully now one of yesterday’s men. That very same day, within hours, I most unusually watched a midday movie, forgetting I could have watched the National Press Club address. The movie was called ‘Iris’, the biography of British novelist Iris Murdoch, an Alzheimer sufferer in her later years. During a medical check, Judi Dench, playing Iris, was asked “Who is the prime minister?” Dench, in her inimitable fashion, made a far better

performance than I did in not answering the same question I had asked myself earlier in the day. As an example of my life-slowness process, it has taken me two hours to write the last two paragraphs, starting from the '...touch of Alzheimer's'. At this rate, I'll never finish this screed. No wonder I have been balking for weeks at opening the laptop and now my headache tells me it is time to close it again, hopefully not for weeks this time.

It is almost 'weeks this time' – close to two – but the laptop is open, without yours truly having a clue what to write. The title at the top of this chapter is, now I see, a false one. Half the title is true - it will be 'final'. As to 'thoughts', I had the grandiose idea of ending these memoirs with many words of philosophical wisdom to enlighten the handful of readers – mostly family, I conjecture – who have persevered thus far.

Family is important to me. As an example, we, the Australian branch of the Pellas family, have in recent months, had a visit from a Swedish branch, the Karlsson family. We are all descendants of the Pellas family of Finland, dating back centuries. I mention the visit as an example because of the involvement by the younger generation.

My daughter Wendy and her husband Mike accommodated the six of them (three generations), for the weekend, entertained them (visits to church and the Blue Mountains) and loaned them a car for the duration of their visit. Mike was even able to help one of them conduct her business in Sweden from Sydney. Pernilla, the young mother of two toddlers, is a journalist (another close family tie for me), and was contributing articles to her magazine one-day a week by e-mail. Mike was able to speed the transmission by lending her a broadband card he uses in his business.

Later, they travelled to Victoria, visiting Bendigo, where they met my brother Ivan, his wife Ethel, their daughters Julie and Toni, being accommodated overnight by my daughter Judith and her husband Stephen in their pioneering-era, stately home turned bed-and-breakfast hostel. Toni was able to drive the visitors to see Grandpa Pellas's home, Hillside, at Harcourt, now, alas, no longer in the family estate. My other Bendigo daughter, Barbara, and her family were unable to greet the Swedish clan due to a previous commitment to a wedding in Melbourne.

I have since received a card from Pernilla's mother Monica saying "thank you for connecting us to all these people" (meaning my family here and in Victoria, and Ivan's family). Monica also says "Now we hope to see them all in Sweden some time." I, too, hope the younger generation continues the 'connection'.

I am contented with this particular 'final thought'. Among others are the thoughts that, as the 'patriarch' – so called by one of the recent Swedish visitors – I will be leaving behind three obviously successful families, established by my three daughters Barbara, Judith and Wendy, chronologically and, coincidentally, alphabetically listed. I am sceptical of people, elderly people, who say they would not change a moment of their lives. There are aspects of my life that that I would have avoided. I will not go into those aspects here, but I hasten to add that they do not concern any of my family or any of their families. They deal solely with my own faults.

However, scepticism aside, I have generally enjoyed my life and would not have changed the trend of it. When problems have arisen, when crossroads have appeared, I have made the natural decision; I have taken the natural road. That means whatever was natural to me, not what would possibly be natural to the majority of people, particularly the conservative majority.

I have not added a word for about two months. I think if I should reach the stage of writing 'THE END', that would mean coming to the end of my life – a subconscious thought, maybe, but definitely a 'final' one. Well, if my favourite music composer, Franz Schubert, could write an unfinished symphony, surely I can write an unfinished memoir. So be it, within a month of my eighty-ninth birthday, these memoirs are just that, and remain... unfinished.

post script

"It is never finished" so far as book publishers are concerned. Now my publisher, my dear loving and loveable grand-daughter Bec, wants me to fill in the four year gap since I finished the unfinished chapter (symphony).

That's publishers for you!

Actually, those four years are full of personal drama. For example, now living in an aged care establishment, I have in recent weeks joined the IT revolution. My family (Wendy, Mike and co) presented me with an Ipod for my birthday. Not bad for a bloke starting his 92nd year. Now nurses looking for me to take my medications, have to search for a fella with earphones drooping around his neck, failing to respond their calls. Typical!

Actually, I have landed on my feet in Lemongrove Gardens, as I said in a birthday card to a former St Marys friend who recently celebrated her 80th.

The laundry label on my clothes is '19 L/G T Pellas'. It doesn't refer to the year of my birth -1919- nor short for 'Life's Good', but it could. It means room 19, Lemongrove Gardens, which is a Penrith based aged care hostel owned and administrated by Anglican Retirement Villages.

After a couple of weeks respite care late in 2009, including the Christmas period, I arrived permanently on February 3rd, 2010. Promptly, a week or so later, I fell returning at 2am from a regular toilet stop, in the dark, and broke my wrist. From this, I recovered gradually, which great nursing care and attention, to the point where I am now the unofficial scribe for 'thankyou', 'get well' and 'Sympathy' cards to residents and their families. Into the bargain, I have been drafted as the main resident gardening representative.

Life's good.

But the lines around current environment do not help to fill in the aforementioned gap of four years. As is apparently usual in one of advanced years, recent memories are harder to recall than those of earlier years. But, I'll do my best.

My last St Marys' years were centred around my rose garden. Having kept in close contact with my former neighbours, I learn that the roses are still providing outstanding

blooms, particularly 'double delight' and 'Blue Moon'. Until my departure, I did all my shopping per favour of 'Toby Two', my ride-on electric scooter. My one regret about Lemongrove is not being able to retain Toby Two, named after my late wife Bet's final favourite small car. I hear that ride-ons are allowed at my first choice of hostel, 'Edenglassie' at Emu Plains. However, the loving care and attention at 'Lemongrove Gardens' more than make up for the loss.

Apart from the roses – and more importantly and intellectually – late St Marys years concentrated on assisting Wendy to obtain her Bachelor of Arts Degree majoring in English Text and Writing. I loaned what little editorial skills I've retained to editing her assignments. Her BA graduation remains one of the best highlights of my life. And the word is that I may be drafted to help again towards Wendy achieving to add 'Masters' to her degree. The master course starts November 2010.

Anglican Retirement Villages (ARV) had entered into my St Marys life during those last four years. In early stages, ARV had conducted monthly 'get-togethers' for residents. Unfortunately, they did not 'click' with many residents of local Housing Department residents. Guest speakers were provided. When the ARV organisers found out that I had written my memoirs, they co-opted me as guest speaker for one meeting. Then, in the last few months leading up to 2009 and beyond, ARV took over my care and cleaning. By this time, I was finding it difficult to organise and cook meals. I had tried Meals on wheels and found them 'wonting' badly, even weekly provision of frozen meals.

So ARV carers were provided to cook meals. However, I felt I still had to provide the ingredients and that became too much of a hassle. So Wendy stepped in and started the process by which I tried respite, which I consequently enjoyed, and speedily entered Lemongrove Gardens permanently.

At this point, I cannot stress too strongly the benefits of entering into aged care. Like most elderly people my age, I had qualms about losing the independence of looking after myself.

Not anymore.

I had a few aged friends, who are mortally afraid of entering aged care establishments. I would like to tell them, there is nothing to be afraid of. On the contrary, the old bogey of 'mental home' types is gone forever. I cannot speak too highly of the care ARV is giving me and I hear there are plenty of other organisations providing similar assistance to us oldies.

These recent gap years have provided a number of 'milestone' birthdays in my family. They started with my first born daughter Barbara turning 60 in 2007. I will never forget that mum told Ivan of the occasion of my 60th, "I can hardly believe I have a 60 year old son". Now, I have two 60 year old daughters, with Judith reaching that milestone this year.

I turned 90 last year, with both Barbara and Judith coming up to join Wendy in my celebrations. Wendy has reached the 50 mark this year, and Mike trails her by only six months come December. Bec is 'too old' to celebrate birthdays, turning 21 two years ago, Ricky turned 21 this year, and Emily turns 18 in December.

I am still mentally and physically active, as witness my official responsibilities as scribe and gardener. However age is catching up with me in other ways.

Early this year, I was recognised by Department of Veteran Affairs as having a war disability of spondylitis – back complaint. This put me up into the war pension bracket (with other disabilities) of Extreme Disability Assessment. This is one step below the maximum of Totally and Permanently Disabled.

Maybe I could reach that now with the latter diagnosis of macular degeneration of the eyes. Suffering from double vision, I was cleared of glaucoma. My optometrist, Alan Wong, says that new glasses, trifocal and particularly separate for glasses for reading will help with lessening the effect of double vision.

Vision Australia has assisted me greatly by providing low lighted magnifying glasses. One handheld is designed to cover the width of a newspaper column. The other is on a swinging arm to help with book reading. The costliest- the newspaper one- was funded by DVA, the other was a demo model given free of charge by Vision Australia. I have come across quite a few poorly sighted people who can't be bothered trying to help themselves. If they would only ask, there is help available.

Hearing too is a problem for me despite a very beneficial \$2,500 upgrade of the otherwise free hearing aids. I may have to try again.

PPS.

post postscriptum

post postscript

This was meant to be the post script (ps) but words ran away from me. These memoirs are not designed to be read by the average reader. These are designed for family history and readership only. I like to think I am the first Pellas journalist to write my memoirs, and I would dearly like other family members to follow.

I know my cousin Geoff Pellas has a daughter or grand-daughter using the Pellas name who was an ABC journalist in Tasmania. The great grand-daughter, Pernilla Karlsson, of my grandfather's brother Otto, is also a journalist.

So there is a trend, however slight. And Pernilla's mother Monica has told me off another cousin in Finland, writing a Pellas history. I hope a copy of my memoirs reaches him and provides some small contribution to his epic.

Now I'm coming to the end of the final (un) finished story – hardly a symphony. Obviously I have not written a 'warts and all' life story. My grand-father Pellas, who I seem to be quoting alot, said 'If you can't say anything good about anybody, don't say it'. I have applied that too, myself.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

My direct family, Wendy, Mike and children, having read the untitled draft copy, have been encouraged in an attempt to give it a title. They have come up with

- Bobby Dazzler Dad
- Steady on Grandpa
- Where's the harp, Tas
- Under the Umbrella Tree
- The Penrith Panther
- Taciturn Tas
- Phillip with two L's
- Unfished Symphony

I liked them all, but was keenest on the first two, perhaps combining them with 'Bobby Dazzler Dad, but Steady On Grandpa'. That was ruled, rightly, too long.

Then Bec, my untiring publisher came up with "The Man from the Bush". Publishers can be difficult, but I hope Bec approves of my final decision.

"The Journo from the Bush".

That's it.

Tas Pellas
10.30pm, November 9, 2010