



**Brindabilla clients tell their stories
You won't believe it!**



S. Hudson

Front cover: Painted by Sylvie Hudson: 'Squirrel'. Painting won first prize at the Dandenong Show in the 1980's.

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Acknowledgements

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Client's family

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Richard reading Pat's story



Sylvie writing

Preface

By the Facilitators: Paula Bain and Richard Freadman

Aims of the project

The activity was designed as a pilot project to trial life-writing (in this case autobiographical writing) as an 'intervention' for people who are experiencing difficulties with their memory (including some who have received a diagnosis of dementia) but who retain significant cognitive abilities. We hoped that the project, which was eventually entitled the Life Story Project, would prove beneficial in the following ways: it would

- provide an opportunity for participants to tell their story, to be heard with close sympathetic attention by others who honour and witness that story, and to discuss it with them;
- help to maintain or build self-esteem through honouring, witnessing and engaging in a really meaningful activity and exercising personal strengths and skills;
- provide a strongly person-centred form of support for participants;
- facilitate stimulating cognitive activity which can enhance quality of life;
- return individuals to a position of executive authority in their own lives, in this case their life-stories: illness, including dementia, so often leaves people feeling 'side lined' in their own lives, but telling their story can re-centre them as owners and tellers of their stories;
- provide an enjoyable form of 'out of home socialization' and participation which encourages sharing, conversation and exploration, and promotes a sense that much of value remains to be explored, shared and achieved;
- help individuals to retain and deepen feelings of connection to times in their lives when they were flourishing – 'feeling really alive', 'comfortable in their own skin' – and help reinforce the feeling that they have a continuous personal identity over time;
- assist participants to 'find their own voice' – to speak with a feeling that this is their unique, authentic, personal voice, narrating their own unique life, speaking of their values, passions and outlook;
- encourage people to value the 'texture' of particular moments of their lives, not just 'big events' and the onward march of chronological progression, and to feel that everyone's story is valuable, regardless of whether they have been famous, publically successful or not;
- offer participants the opportunity to fashion a narrative which, in addition to recording aspects of their life, becomes a craft-object that they can work on as they might work on a painting or a piece of pottery: such crafting can promote feelings of personal wellbeing;
- provide positive support to those who may be experiencing depression in connection with their memory difficulties (and perhaps their diagnosis) to feel more positive and fulfilled;
- help participants to create a narrative which they can take with them on their journey into more intensive care to provide an on-going point of reference for them and important personal information for their carers (working with individuals in the early stage of memory loss is important as their voice can still be 'captured').

The Facilitators

Paula has worked for Baptistcare for almost five years. She works as a Diversional Therapist in the Home Care Packages team based in the Eastern Region. Paula supports the team by working with clients to develop meaningful activities for them to engage in at home; offers support and education to care workers to enhance respite for clients; links clients into community activities to assist them to be more socially engaged. Paula believes that knowing the person's story and their background is critical to developing appropriate and meaningful activities to engage the client. When Paula heard Richard lecture (on three occasions) she made contact with him and after conversations confirmed their strong mutual interest in life stories, she invited him to meet her Manager, Michael Faneco.

Paula has a varied background. She commenced work as a primary school teacher and then studied Sociology at La Trobe University, after which she became an Outreach Youth worker. All her positions have involved working with individuals who require extra care. After further study in Community Development, Paula moved into the Aged Care Sector, specialising in Dementia Care. She worked for over seven years as an Educator at Alzheimer's Australia Vic. Her many workshops for families and professionals have emphasised the fundamental importance of knowing the person's story in order to provide appropriate care and support.

Richard is the recently-retired Professor of English and Director of the Unit for Studies in Biography and Autobiography at La Trobe University. For four decades Richard has been fascinated by the way people tell their life-stories and how they tell stories about the lives of others – a field that is often known as life-writing – and by the part individual life-stories play in the building and maintaining of personal identity and memory. During his professional life Richard taught many workshop-based classes in the craft of writing memoir, autobiography and biography. He has also worked with private individuals on their life-stories.

Richard has long hoped to take his life-writing interests and skills out into the wider community, particularly in health care settings. He felt, however, that his experience as an educator would not be sufficient to do this. In 2013 he took the first module of Alzheimer's Australia's training course, Dementia Care Essentials. He has since given several presentations – lectures, sometimes with a workshop component – as part of Alzheimer's Australia Victoria's Education and Training Program. After a meeting with Paula and the immensely supportive Michael Faneco, Richard was delighted to accept an invitation from Baptistcare to undertake life story activities with clients experiencing memory difficulties. In time this led to the current collaborative project with Paula.

Location and Clientele

We chose to run the program in a day centre setting (this differentiates it from the small number of other dementia care life story programs in Australia, all of which as far as we know are run in residential settings) at Brindabella in Oakleigh. Participants and staff were seated around a circular table in a designated room. We requested that selection of participants be made by the Planned Activity Group Coordinator in consultation with them. Particularly in this early 'pilot' phase, we thought it desirable that participants be people who are by nature quite sociable and who retain quite good cognitive capacities. Issues relating

to age, gender and cultural background were also considered when selecting participants. We hoped that participants would still be capable of writing, since this might enable quite complex narrative activity such as shaping, editing and revising the narrative and would help to sustain writing and related skills. Two of the three were in fact capable of writing, but the third, being vision-impaired, had to dictate her narrative verbally during the sessions and have it read back to her after it had been transcribed.

We see value in providing this activity early in the individual's dementia journey (or soon after they begin to experience concerns, whether diagnosed or not, about their memory), so that they have solid narrative foundations in place to assist memory work of various kinds as their condition moves to later phases.

Whilst we believe that an ideal size for a group such as this would be about six persons, the unavailability of three people who had originally expressed an interest in participating meant that the group consisted of three participants. These were:

Sylvie Hudson

Sylvie is eighty-one years old. She received a diagnosis of dementia in 2009. Sylvie remains alert, sociable and engaged in life. She is still able to write with reasonable fluency. Her early memories remain solid and she has a good general grasp of her current life situation (eg moving from the family home to residential care). It was noticeable that Sylvie tended to narrate the same parts of her life repeatedly and was often unaware from session to session that she was repeating herself. She is an enthusiastic and vivid story teller. Sylvie's narrative tendency is to write the past in vignettes, rather than in strong chronological sequences. A considerable amount of editorial work was also required to thread Sylvie's various reminiscences into a continuous narrative. This involved eliminating a good deal of repetition and correcting punctuation and other errors. (The latter literacy issues as Sylvie's daughter Liz suggests are probably not, or at least not solely, attributable to her dementia.)



Len Hudson

Len is eighty-six years old. Len is Sylvie's husband of fifty one years. Len has experienced some minor difficulties with memory and was diagnosed with vascular dementia in 2013. Len writes very fluently, has vivid early memories which he is able to describe in compelling detail, and is a passionate and voluminous autobiographical story teller. His narrative tendency is linear in the sense that he likes to start at the beginning and work chronologically through various experiences. Len is enthusiastic, sociable and a good listener and seems to leave his concerns about late life changes behind him during the sessions.

Because Len is such a prolific writer we were unable to include all of the pieces he wrote during the project in this volume.

Pat Gordon

Pat is ninety-one years old. She is severely vision-impaired and both expressed and exhibited a lack of confidence about her ability to participate in the project, especially early on. As she gained confidence she became very involved in the process and narrated aspects of her life quite fluently and with an edge of sometimes wicked wit. Whilst she is not naturally given to long continuous descriptions of things, she gains narrative momentum as she gains confidence. Pat is sociable and still very engaged in life. Her narrative tendency is to work through small loosely-connected narrative snippets. Whilst her early memories still seem solid, and she seems well aware of her current life situation, she did have a tendency to repeat material she had already narrated in earlier sessions. This was to some extent an issue of memory; however it also seemed that she repeatedly gravitated to certain aspects of her experience because they gave her particular pleasure and she enjoyed sharing that pleasure with the group. A considerable amount of editorial work was required to thread Pat's various reminiscences into a continuous narrative (the focus of some passages having been prompted by Paula and Richard during the sessions themselves).

After the completion of the workshops, Paula met with Pat one-on-one at Brindabilla and read Pat's narrative to her to confirm that Pat was happy with it and to make any final corrections. At the meeting Paula asked Pat "how does it sound for you to hear your story read to you?" Pat replied: "It is marvellous really. It's exactly how I told it."

Methodology

The project took the form of nine one-hour, once-weekly writing workshops with Paula and Richard as Facilitators. This workshop format was loosely based on the 'creative writing workshop' which has a long history in community and educational settings and in which Richard has extensive experience. Such workshops are designed to teach fundamentals of the craft of life-writing – for instance, finding one's own individual voice, selecting the material for inclusion in the narrative, sequencing the narrative – and to provide a fun, supportive atmosphere in which participants feel free to speak their own truth, to comment honestly but sympathetically on one another's writing, and to share the love and excitement of human story- telling with others.

Participants – with the exception of Pat who is vision-impaired – wrote pieces between meetings which they then read out for discussion in the workshop. The group, including the writer, then discussed the piece, commenting on whatever took their interest – it could be

experiences and people described in the writing; or the techniques the writer used; or values and attitudes that the writer expressed; memories of past times that the writing brought to life. All sorts of comment were welcome, including suggestions as to how the writing might be improved. These conversations were great fun and in this project humour – one of the most therapeutically powerful media of all – played a big part. Participants were encouraged and indeed empowered to say and write whatever they liked – so long as each person's comments and writing were treated respectfully.

We proposed that an anthology based on the workshop pieces be published and the group agreed on the title *You Won't Believe It!* for the volume. The guiding idea, proposed by the Facilitators, was that the various pieces should focus on moments or phases of life in which the author felt 'really alive', felt that he or she was 'really flourishing'. This required participants, to some extent at least, to 'stay on theme' – a challenge that was not always met (see below).

The Facilitators offered guidance on the writing process, but their main function was to empower and encourage. They were never prescriptive about the 'what' or the 'how'. They wanted the writers to be as proactive as possible. When all of the material for the anthology was 'in', Richard and Paula gathered and organized it and did some editing of grammar and punctuation. However, this editing was designed to leave the personal voice of the participants intact and accurately to reflect their current level of expressive competence.

In general the workshop unfolded as follows

- Meet and greet over tea and coffee
- Recap on general points about writing made at the previous meeting
- Participants read their writing with assistance as and when necessary
- Group discussion of the piece
- Closing discussion

At each workshop each of the participants was given some 'homework' to do between sessions; for instance, looking through photographs to help prompt and refresh memories. Generally homework involved doing some writing. Both Sylvie and Len arrived at each session having done some writing to share.

Assessment and monitoring

This 'pilot' version of the project was not subjected to quantitative assessment. However, qualitative assessment was conducted via on-going participant feedback given to Brindabilla staff, observation of narrative competence, morale and social participation across the nine weeks, and feedback from the Brindabilla staff who attended sessions as observers.

Sylvie Hudson: My Life and Passions

Early Days

My parents lived in Chinkapook, a small wheat growing area in the Mallee. As I had an elder brother and sister and we were far from a hospital, my mother went to stay with her twin

sister in Gisborne prior to my birth. There was a small country hospital there which is now a doctor's surgery. I was born on March 10, 1933.

At three months old I got whooping cough. It made me a cross-eyed little baby. By the time I was about three or three-and-a-half years old my mother had to get me some glasses. As a child I hated wearing them and twenty or more years later my sister told me I got my glasses and bent them in half and put them down the side of the back door set of steps. My mother was not pleased with me. When I was seventeen years old I found out I had a little hole in my left ear. That might have been caused by the whooping cough too.

Chinkapook was very small indeed. My father owned the local butcher's shop. I can remember being told of a time my father stayed later after he closed the shop one Saturday afternoon with two male helpers. He told them to get something out of the big freezer, then locked them in there for a while with the meat hanging up! He let them out after a while but they would have been very cold!

Church and Sunday school were held in the local hall. In that same hall my mother played piano with two accompanists. As well I can remember we often had friends and soldiers on leave in for a sing-along.

I can remember as a small child staying at an Aunt's place and we all slept upstairs and I slid down the bannister. It was lucky they had a huge knob at the end so I could hold it to get off. That was Kyneton. They had a shop but I cannot remember what they sold there. But I can remember they had outdoor toilets with a pull chain to flush them.

By 1940 I had two younger brothers. After the effects of the Depression and a drought my father and eldest brother were forced to move to Melbourne. The rest of us arrived two years later when Father had saved enough money for a deposit on a House in St Albans. This deposit was £500.

When we moved to Melbourne I was ten or nearly. I went to school in St Albans State School with my brother and sister older and two brothers younger. We all had to walk about half a mile to school, rain or shine. When I went to school I got nicknamed '4-eyes' because I had to wear glasses.

I don't remember much about the school years except that when I got to grade 6 I was put up the back, but it didn't take the teacher long to realize that I should be up the front to see and hear him. I was not good at maths or spelling, but [good with] the other side of my brain which is craft, sewing, fancy work, art, like my mother was good at, my older sister and one brother younger too. I used to sew nice fancy work and my mum did the crochet around the edge for me. As I got older I got better at art as my mother did it and my sister was good and one younger brother. When I got to about thirteen I told my mother I would like to learn to do tap dancing lessons. I was very pleased when I achieved a bronze medal and continued lessons in ballet as well, 'til I was seventeen. Soon after that ballroom dancing became the thing.

I got my first mouth organ when I was about fifteen. I had a trip to Geelong with my mum and dad and I saw a mouth organ in a shop and I asked my mum could I buy one. It did not take



Sylvie acting

me long to teach myself to play it. Then I could play it with my mother when she played the piano.

I joined a choir when I was about nineteen years old, with my mother. It did not take them long to find out I was alto voice. I really enjoyed that.

Someone suggested when I was about twenty-two years old it might be good to join Bambi Smith Department School, and I did feel proud when my mother and sister came to see me at the finishing ceremony parade down the catwalk at the Chevron Hotel. I made an after-five dress for the occasion and gained my certificate.

Len and Marriage and Family Life

As the years passed only two male companions came into my life. Neither was what I was seeking for a lifetime relationship. I had adapted a prayer over the years and every night I would pray the same prayer. I would ask God to send me a man who did not smoke

and did not drink alcohol but was interested in Church a little. Then in 1960 on [a] Sunday I went to church with my mother. We were sitting about four rows from the front and right up the front there was a young man and I wondered who he was. It was Len and it did not take us long to get to know each other. We used to go out on day drives and went to drive-in movies, talked about what we liked.

Two years after we met we married. At our wedding Len had two of his brothers as groomsmen and I had my sister and older brother's wife as bridesmaids, and a flower girl and page boy – a young niece and nephew. After our wedding we went to the local hall for the reception. Then after that we went to a motel I think and stayed the night, then went on a trip around Victoria – up to Yallourn North and around that area for about one or two weeks. When holidays came we would go somewhere else.

We had Deaconess Gwen Richards and the PFA (Parents and Friends Association) gave us some kitchen things to use with cooking – hand beater, little bowl to mix in, and so on. Then Len had to get back to school for teaching. We both joined things to do with the church, like PFA.

We had our first little girl, Liz, a year later in Sunshine. Then we had to move as Len's mother became ill and could not live on her own. Then Len got a job teaching at Cobram.

I can remember when Len's mother used to sit at the open fire drying the baby's nappies they would get scorched.

Another time I remember Len's mother and I with Elizabeth went to the shops. In those days the clothing was on tables or things you could not see under and Liz being little could not see us as we looked round the shop. She thought we had gone home without her. A little while later we missed her and could not find her. Len's mum said she would go home and

see if Liz [had gone] home and I stayed still looking for her for a while. After I went home and Len's mum told me when she got home there was Liz at the front door crying her eyes out because no one would let her in. We were very amazed at her knowing her way home, and ever since then when we went on trips she would say "we have been there before daddy".

I can remember back in Cobram because we lived nearly opposite the swimming pool and our daughter was about three years old and her grandma was in the front garden with her doing gardening. Liz got over the fence and ran over to the swimming pool with her grandma running after her. Liz got very close to the edge when a man raced out from the kiosk and grabbed her before she got in the pool and Len's mum caught up and brought her home and after that she did not or was not allowed to go in the front yard. Len even built a wire thing where she could get out under a rose bush at the side of the house and she complained to him – she said 'no daddy me out'.

Two years later in Cobram our son Donald was born. Because he was three weeks premature I had to let him stay in hospital for three weeks 'til he was a good weight to be let come home. I had to bottle feed him. In Cobram I joined the Church Choir, the Ladies Guild, and Ladies Choir of Cobram. It was there I first became interested in floral art competitions, as Len's mother did, and we both won prizes in floral art there.

In 1968 we moved to Melbourne for Len to start teaching at Caulfield Grammar School and Len's mother went to live with another son. Upon our return to Melbourne we lived with my mother (or in a house opposite her) in St Albans until a school residence became available in East St Kilda, where we lived for some years. In St Albans the neighbour behind us used to throw all kinds of rubbish over our back fence. One time they threw a dead rabbit over the back fence and my husband threw it back over the fence and it landed on the roof of their shed or something and they could not find it. It would have smelt very bad. They did not do that again! It was there I became interested in making ribbon roses. I learnt that then I got prizes for them too in the Royal Melbourne Show.

Then Len wanted to build his own house. So we went to Mount Waverley to look for a block of land there. We found a block not built on right next to a very large area of land. He went to a neighbour and asked what is going to happen with the land. They did not know but thought it might not be built on. So we bought the block next to the big area and my husband built there. Our son hammered in the first nail. We lived there for about thirty years.

Art, Craft, Music, Cake Decorating and Much Else!

As the years went by and as my mother and her sister could paint nice pictures I went to classes for art and oil painting after we moved to Mount Waverley. I entered in the Royal Melbourne Show and I got First Prize for a squirrel and a rosette which my daughter has now. Then some years later I got Third Prize for a tiger I had painted in oil which my son will get. I have entered and sold paintings in the Herald Art Show as well as Dandenong Art Show. I have enjoyed the medium of pastel drawing and also water colour too. I can also remember doing a painting of a cat and I sold it at the Box Hill Show. The lady who bought it said it was for her little girl.

I also got interested in singing in a ladies choir with a lady who helped in the school canteen at Sussex Heights School as I did. We went all over the place to sing to Senior Citizens groups and others. I really enjoyed that. We did that for a number of years 'til our conductor got ill and could not do it anymore. I missed that, but I remember [in another choir] doing a solo of Meg and Peg and I had to use a broom handle because I forgot my extra leg!



Sylvie's writing

Some years later – about eight years – we had to stop that choir as our pianist got arthritis and could not play anymore. Then I got interested in church choirs.

Len would encourage me in different crafts. I am so grateful now. I did a course for eighteen months learning floral art and ribbons. When we moved to South Clayton Len encouraged me and I joined art groups to improve my style. I did a painting of him in a class and when Len came to pick me up the art teacher said “could you wait a minute?” and she touched up something on the face. I will enjoy painting for many years to come.

I also took up learning to make and ice wedding cakes. I remember one I did for someone. When my husband drove me there to give it to her she had to take it somewhere and she forgot something she left inside. So she put it on something outside and went inside to get it. While she was inside a bird came down and had a peck of it!

Another time I was making a two tier wedding cake with the help of a friend of the person the cake was for. I charged them \$120 and gave the helper \$20. The wedding fell apart but they had to still pay me and the helper!

Now my husband and I are starting a new life together in an old people's home called Oak Towers and I can still do more art and craft there.

And there by the Grace of God went Sylvie Hudson.

Len Hudson Remembers

A Christian Family

My mother, Mabel Wall, married my father, William Taylor Hudson, on 6th April 1916 at Sebastopol, then travelled to Merbein, Victoria, near Mildura and lived on a fruit block. There she gave birth to nine boys including two sets of twins, all within twelve years. I was the youngest.

We all attended the Merbein Presbyterian Church and Sunday school in the mornings, then in the afternoon we attended a second Sunday school held in the local school, with my

mother being one of the Sunday school teachers. She was also a leader in the PWMU (Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union).

Two of us became Sunday school teachers, Elders, and members of the Property Board. Over the years I have been Sunday School Superintendent in St Albans and Huntingdale, Session Clerk to the Council of Elders, and Property Officer.

Today my daughter, Liz, is studying for the Ministry. May God's blessing be with her in the future.

Reflections on My Childhood and Early Teens

As it was at the start of the Depression, money was scarce and I was on an allowance of 1p a week until I was about thirteen, though we could pick grapes into a dip tin for a further 1p each tin. One penny would buy four liquorice blocks or one shop-made ice block.

However, for us, life was happy and food plentiful, growing our own fruit both for eating fresh and for preserving, making jams and sharing with others. We also grew vegetables, and our pickles, sauces and chutneys were great.

On a dry or unirrigated property about 5km away, Dad grew wheat and oats for the stock, and in school holidays it was also used by those going rabbiting. At the end of one holiday, my brother Lester collected all the traps to take home. Unfortunately, one was still set and as Lester threw it over his shoulder it hit him on the bottom and went off. Ow!

Sunday school picnics were sometimes held by a billabong and at other times on very large sand hills.

This reminds me of another property at Merbein South. There was a slight slope on one fence where shrubs caught the sand blown in by the westerly's. As the shrubs and trees collected such sand as the wind carried, new fences had to be built above the previous fences. To my memory, there were four fences, one above the other and a hill built up above on both sides.

My very first memory is when I was only about three or four years old, and I walked outside to see the lady washing the clothes. What a job that was, sheets alone for the family including Mum, Dad and eight boys.

Washing took place under a tank stand enclosed on two sides. Mum had a machine with a wooden tub and a handle to turn, connected to a spindle in the middle and a mechanism causing fingers inside to move backwards and forwards. After about fifteen minutes, the clothes were transferred to the copper. Next the clothes were transferred to the rinsing tub and finally moved to the blue-rinse. After wringing by hand they were hung on long wires between trees and sheds.

I can remember when the meat had been roasted. All the dripping was clarified in a saucepan with water. Any residue of meat and gravy was skimmed off then the water and oil were allowed to cool. The solidified fat was then added to a container and stored until a sufficient quantity was available. This, with water, was boiled in the copper, caustic soda was carefully added to prevent it splashing and causing an injury. Any other ingredients, if

needed, were added and the liquid soap was transferred to a special metal container to cool and set.

The set soap was then cut into appropriate sizes for each wash. Mum would cut the day's supply into slithers and boil those up with water ready to mix in the washing machine.

I remember we also made black boot polish, a nasty black paste hard to remove from the hands. When applied to the shoes it needed vigorous rubbing, for it was otherwise a problem if kicked against other things where it often took ages to remove.

The earliest photo I remember, taken at home, was of four of us all on a draught horse. I was at the front, only about one-and-a half-years old. But of course I was on a horse! Dad was very keen on his horses and did he get cross if he saw anyone mistreating any animal, horse, cow, sheep, dog or cat.

House Keeping, Culinary Delights and Wartime

With eight boys, Dad and Mum in the house, Mum was very, very busy. Even with a helper in the house once a week and a helper with the washing, Mum was often up 'til well past midnight.

I remember when I was about twelve or thirteen asking Mum if there was any way I might help. After that I learned to darn socks, iron hankies and shirts and do some minor cooking.

What a blessing that proved to be when Dad became seriously ill and Mum had to take him to Melbourne for a major operation. She stayed with Grandma for a number of years and we were left to bach.

My brother Col made a batch of scones with plain flour. We called them cricket balls.

Whenever I didn't know how to cook something, I would ring my auntie about 2km away to get recipes or instructions. I also bought Tandaco brand steam pudding mixes.

I had prepared one of these one Sunday and left it, and the boiler with hot water plus instructions for cooking, with an old chap who often came in to sit and read and share a meal, as I was going out. Old Charlie tried to repeat the instructions to Col. "Do I boil up the water then pour this mixture into it?" asked Charlie. Col agreed, not really listening. So my bowl of steamed pudding met its end, but fortunately for me, that day I was invited by my aunt's to stay for lunch.



Len and Sylvie's writings

I cannot let this record go without some other pre-war and wartime stories or facts.

- Groceries

Each week the grocer's man came to take our orders, to be delivered the next day. But in the meantime, many groceries had to be measured, weighed and bagged.

I remember a friend's mother, a good cook, had to make wedding cakes. She made up the mixture and was about to place it in the oven when she tasted the mixture. Yuk! She added more sugar still. YUK, YUK, YUK! The boy measuring out the order took a bag and labelled it sugar but filled it with salt. The whole order had to be repeated. I don't know if the boy got the sack, but...!

- Milk

For those in the town, milk was delivered in large containers then ladled out into the householder's billies, saucepans or buckets. Sometimes the money would end up at the bottom of the milk, and even some dairymen would claim, if the milk wasn't quite so strong as usual, "It was raining that morning". But, from my little experience, I can justly believe that most deliverers were quite honest.

- Bread

Our baker's cart delivered bread Monday to Friday. If we forgot to put our bread bin and order out, he would walk inside and open the bin for himself and judge our needs. He never touched anything else and he was quite helpful and reliable.

- Fish

Occasionally a truck would call in with a catch of fish. Not refrigerated – it would be unlawful today – but it was a real change from two-tooth mutton, fowl or pork.

Sometimes a carrier might bring rabbits, but we caught our own or went without. Another travelling salesman I can remember was Rawley's man who brought dress material lengths and boys' clothing materials. All were helpful for those with treadle sewing machines.

This and That – Lessons to Learn

Bath time at home when I was about five was in an iron bath in Mum's bedroom. It stood on four legs and the water at the end would be run through a drain pipe onto the garden.

On Saturdays the water was heated in the copper and carried in by hand. Usually two of us would bath together using the same water.

What a wonderful change it was when four new bedrooms and a kitchen were added, and a separate bathroom with a bath and shower, with hot and cold running water on tap, were installed in 1937!

Our fruit pickers slept in a galvanized hut and a shower set-up consisted of an outside hessian surround. There was a hook to hang up a bucket of water, and as they showered each pulled on a rope to tip the water over themselves, little by little.

When I was in Grade 3 or 4 as a pupil, the Prep teacher came in to take singing. As two of us must have seemed well off-key, we were sent outside to do gardening. This was continued with both of us right up to the end of Year 8. I've often wondered if that might have happened if it were Spelling, Maths or Science that was poor. By now we might be top gardeners. But no, what a silly thought! If I couldn't sing properly, I should have been encouraged to sing softly.

A very old concrete swimming pool at Merbein was about 2½ miles (4km) away. As we had to walk or cycle to it, it was certainly pleasant at first, but the trip home in the heat seemed hardly worth the effort.

The story of some of the larrikin students in Grade 8 at Merbein Central is worth recording here.

It was hot at lunchtime and the group ran some distance from the school along a major irrigation channel. There they stripped off and had a swim. When one of the boys had had enough he got out and dressed, encouraging the others to do the same. I imagine they made fun of him for going back so soon, then they ignored him. He picked up all their clothes and returned to the school, and strung them up the flag pole.

It was not long before a teacher saw the clothes, then took the clothes down and demanded where their owners were. A male member of staff, quite angry, returned the clothes and waited while the boys dressed and returned to school. I wonder what might have been the reaction in the staffroom.

A friend, Mr Doughty, whose fruit block was on the edge of the vineyards in South Merbein, had enormous problems from birds in Cores' Swamp, eating his grapes. He erected a motor attached to an aeroplane propeller; he set up a shotgun with blanks; he tried all sorts of devices until he became almost broken, then he had to sell out and leave.

I was quite young when I first noted our unordained minister calling on his parishioners. Usually cycling, he would come with his Bible, a quiet message and a prayer. Wages [for men like him] were very low in small parishes, but he was very devoted, so most members would share some of their produce. So it was that you might see the minister cycling home, often carrying some fruit, vegetables, eggs, cream or butter, even milk, and well he'd deserved it.



A Brief Wartime Memory

The daily newspapers.

Letters, sometimes cut about by the censors.

“Don’t speak, the news is on the radio.”

Mum made and sent so many fruit cakes in special wartime cake tins, and oh how our boys would share them around, for they had plenty of our own dried fruits and walnuts, and sometimes almonds.

Then of course there was the news of the missing, the killed, the prisoners...

Italian prisoners in Australia were pleased to work on farms.

Memories of My Brothers

In a shed at home was an old horse-drawn caravan, covered with canvas and bags. It was much the worse for age and wear. Yet it was still used by my older brothers to camp in at our dry or unirrigated farm during school holidays.

When I asked about it, I was told how Dad had used it when he was with a team of horses and a dray to cart wheat or wool to the paddle steamers on the Murray River.

After delivering, their loads would then pass downstream until reaching the river mouth, where it would be sold or re-shipped to other centres.

That old caravan was Dad's home and served him well for many a year.

Perhaps because I was the youngest, or because I loved to listen to stories about our past, these stories have stayed with me. But let me leave my family history to another time, and tell you now about my brothers.

Lawrence Edwin Hudson, or Lawrie, finished his education at Longeranong Agricultural College. He kept fowls, obtaining boxes of chickens from a supplier elsewhere, and placed them first in small brooders and then into larger sheds and yards. He joined a local group of others also keen on keeping poultry. He was also keen on the work of the Australian Country Party. Though I might listen, it never really excited me as it did him.

John Alexander Hudson, or Johnnie, left school to get a job in a menswear store. Not only did he dress well but it stood him well throughout his whole life.

In his early days in the army during the Second World War, he became first an Officer's Batman. Yet his real wish was to become a stretcher bearer. When he was advised that he was too short and light, he moved into working in the army hospitals. This saw him transferred to Port Moresby, New Guinea. There he became friendly with another hospital orderly, an entomologist, and together they travelled around the surrounding bush on leave days, studying and catching butterflies. By the time his mate had been transferred, John had enough knowledge and experience to continue it alone, and to make a profit from it. He would net the butterflies, anaesthetize them, thus killing them as taught. He would take a piece of heavy cardboard or ply discarded in the hospital, cover it with unusable cotton wool and place the dead butterflies on that. He would then wash down x-rays no longer valuable and cover the display with this, taping it to form a beautiful display. Many such displays were sold, especially to the Yanks who passed through.



After the war, he turned to selling insurance, where he was greatly respected for his work with the MLC Insurance Company.

Lester William Hudson, known as 'Lecker' or Les, was the third oldest brother. He was unable to get a job locally due to the Depression.

Our Grandmother, Jane Wall, was talking one day to another parishioner in Darling, a Melbourne suburb, and learned that he had a vacancy in his cabinet works. Grandma sent word and offered Lester board with her. Lester welcomed the chance and there he worked until entering the army.

'Lecker' was the only one of our family fighting in the front line, and the only one I had little [opportunity] to know when young, for he left home when I was only about six or seven years old and he around fifteen when he left home.

Gordon Leslie Wall Hudson, or 'Gordo', was my fourth eldest brother. From birth he took the appearance of my mother's side of the family and hence the name 'Wall' in his name. I too have this added name, and am proud of it.

As a baby, I am told, his health was poor and he reacted to drinking mother's milk. One day a friend suggested that Dad should buy two goats and milk them. Gordon's health improved immediately.

When only about two years old, he pulled a saucepan of boiling water over himself. With three older brothers and twins as babies as well, my mum had her hands full. A friend, Mrs Dean, with her husband, who both assisted in the orchard, took over Gordon's care. He lived at her home and played with her children, and he began to call her 'Mum'.

For a considerable time he forgot who his real mum was. Oh, how it must have hurt my mum, especially as he would come with Mrs Dean, who packed oranges at the time!

One day, Gordon was playing in our yard when he fell over and hit his head. Then he ran to Mum, his old memory restored. He hugged her, and cried, "Mum, Mum, Mum". I imagine she was overjoyed, but oh how Mrs Dean must have felt – she was devastated! Nevertheless, as long as she lived, Mrs Dean remained Gordon's number one friend.

As a young boy, Gordon became interested in bird-nesting. One day he took a ladder out to collect eggs from a tall palm tree. As he carried these down in his mouth, he slipped and swallowed one. After climbing down, he took a needle to make a hole in each end to blow out the egg. But those eggs were ready to hatch and he had swallowed one. The thought alone made him sick!

Ernest Keith Hudson and Maurice Henry Hudson were twins. Together at school, members of the Scouts and went to the Sydney Jamboree. They were always skylarking together. They both learned the violin to the level of sitting for their ALCM exam, but Ern was called up for his Services health check the day he was to do the ALCM exam and so never received that award.

When in about Grade Five, their teacher continually mixed them up and so, instead called both 'Twinny' or Hudson. If she told one to stay in after school for some misdemeanour, that one was likely to move out quickly while the other pretended to stay behind. When that one was reminded of the offence, he would reply, "Oh, no Miss, that was my brother". That teacher was never able to win if she only 'punished' one of them.

When Ern left school he got a job at Washington Motors and gained a good background in working amongst the second-hand cars. I think that alone may have encouraged him to become interested in planes. He joined the RAAF in the Second World War.

While stationed in Darwin, he planted, as did many from farms, vegetables outside his tent. One day he saw an officer and peace time friend passing by and offered him a watermelon. After that, his time was often devoted to growing fresh vegies for other officers.

Another experience for Ern (or 'Fat' as he was known at home) came when he was transferred to Queensland. There he would be dressed in a gas mask, women's scanties, and other protective gear and sent into a gas chamber to test the effectiveness of such

measures if the enemy used gas. It was a real joke with him: “the airforce made him dress in ladies’ scanties”.

Maurie, known to his school mates as ‘Skinny’, was never the same after ‘Fatty’ joined up. He became a loner. Leaving home we heard little of him ‘til the police informed us that he had caught the flu, rolled out of bed on a cold night and died. He is buried at Warwick in Queensland.

Colin Noel Hudson and Harley Hudson were the second set of twins.

Harley became ill and died at about eighteen months.

‘Col’ was the shortest of our family but he excelled us all in two areas in particular. He loved to make friends, especially girls, and he loved all sport. First to get to school to get the bat or ball, the football or the jumping pit. No time to spare on lunch. No wonder he won cups for athletics, football and cricket. I can still see him in my memory, from a very tiny boy to a teenager, jumping high jump then walking back underneath, some centimetres above his head. His highest score in local cricket was 125 runs. In Year 8 at Merbein Central School, he won the Championship Cup. He won Best and Fairest awards as a rover in the local Magpies Merbein football team.

Working on our fruit block at home, he was much the same. “I’ll race you to prune a row of grapes or” Compete, compete, compete, but always fun to work with. Yes, in age Col was my closest brother.

We went to school at about the same time, we worked together for years on the fruit block when our brothers were in the forces, and when I decided to again study part-time he backed me whenever he could.



Len reading, Liz watching

Teaching – My Vocation

Teaching had many benefits outside the classroom. At my first appointment at a small one teacher school, a member of the School Council [was expected to] supply or find accommodation for the teacher.

The people were pleasant, friendly people who produced vegetables, mainly carrots and lettuces.

Soon after arriving, I was given a puzzle to solve, with the statement “I guarantee you’ll never solve it”. In fact it was quite simple, if one had learnt algebra. But, it certainly surprised the one who had given it to me. “How did you do it?” he asked. “By algebra!” I said. That gave me a real boost in his eyes!

Teaching Nature Studies became a special pleasure when teaching at Yallourn North. We collected and pressed wild flowers and weeds, went bird watching, and pinned out insects.

One night when one of my Grade 5 students awoke with a scream, she had been stung by a centipede. Her dad raced in, and on being informed of what had happened, snatched up a shoe to kill it. “No Daddy, No! Don’t kill it, I want it for school.” That day we had a centipede in a bottle to study.

Another day, two boys arrived with a snake about 20cm long. One of them carried it to school in his pocket after finding it on the roadside.

I said “find a bottle and put it in, then place it on the window sill.” About 2 o’clock that afternoon, with the sun shining on the window sill, the ‘dead’ snake proved to be very much alive! It poked its head out of the top of the bottle and I placed a book over the top, leaving it to talk about later after finishing my talk about the immediate lesson.

I bought my first car, a Hillman Husky, while teaching at Yallourn North. On several occasions I spent time touring with three or four boys on Saturdays to Lakes Entrance, Bulga Park and so on.

The girls asked why didn’t I take some of them and I said, “If one of your mothers comes too, I’d be glad to take some girls”.

When we went to Bulga Park with boys and then girls with one of their mothers, I think the girls were more appreciative of the beauty of toadstools where boys were more interested in the elusive movements of the birds. That may only be true with those particular students, I’m not sure.

One thing is sure, the boys wanted to share their chewies with me and when theirs ran out, I gave them back again.

For one of those trips I was to pick up Ian at the self-service shop at 7.30am. By 7.45 he had still not turned up and I decided I could wait no longer. Just then I saw someone running towards me, still in his pyjamas.

“Mr Hudson, Mr Hudson, wait for me. I slept in.” It couldn’t have happened to anyone but Ian. Yes, that was Ian alright! You never knew what he might do next, but he was fun to have around.

One afternoon in spring, I was really suffering from hay fever, so I took the only available tablet then, a Tabasan. I set the children to work with instructions to bring it for correction when finished, then I went to my desk at the back of the class.

One of my top students stood up to bring her work to me, and realized I had gone to sleep. She whispered to the others “He’s gone to sleep, let’s go on reading quietly.” When I finally awoke, all was quiet.

Thank goodness there are now better tablets than Tabasan!

And thank goodness you get from people the respect you give them.

Move to Melbourne, Building the Family Home – and Keeping it in the Family!

After living most of my life in the country, I obtained a teaching position at Caulfield Grammar School. Returning to St Albans with my family, we lived for a while with my mother-in-law.

Realizing that my future work would be in metropolitan Melbourne, I perused the Age Newspaper for a suitable block with an open or country-like aspect.

One Saturday I set out with my family and a list of eight possible blocks for purchase. The third of these was at 50 Carrol Grove, East Oakleigh. There was a house next door on the eastern side whilst a creek and reserve were on the south side. On the western side, heavy machinery had been shaping the ground even though the creek ran through it. Seeing a neighbour in his garden opposite, I approached him and asked why the machinery was there. "I don't know, they're making some type of park there", he said. With a creek and parkland to the south, and about 30 acres of park to the west of the block for sale, what could be better anywhere in Melbourne, and at a price to suit my purse?

On the following Monday I rang the appropriate council to enquire about conditions and restrictions, then paid my deposit on the sale.

My first task was to erect a lockable fernery with benches on three sides, one of which had doors at the front. This gave me storage for such as a shovel, pick and other tools as I planned ahead. Then I built a Coolgardie safe in the fernery to store some crockery, cutlery, tomato sauce, tea, sugar, salt, pepper and first aid.

As we had two children who might come out at times, I then erected a swing, monkey bars and a basketball ring.

Planning our home next took place. To be built on a slab foundation with in-floor heating and pipes to bring in water and others to remove waste, it took me quite some time to complete this stage.

Having cut and prepared all timber, I was ready to erect the frame. At that time our son, Don, was six years old. I asked him to drive in the first nail, which he did, both to his and my satisfaction.

To prevent children playing in the play area and hurting themselves or others and interfering with the work, I erected a temporary cyclone fence across the front. I heard many derogatory comments about this, yet today a builder here will not start without first erecting a cyclone fence.

Bit by bit I completed our home with a flat roof so that neighbours further up the hill might share the view over my roof. On the 1st of June 1974 we proudly moved into the home to live.

As time went by my daughter said, "Daddy, don't sell this place to anyone else. One day I want to buy it."

When it came time for us to down-size I asked her if she still wanted to buy it and her response was, "When are you going, tomorrow?"

She and her family still live here, and my wife and I are back there as we arrange to enter a retirement village.



Pat and Don on bike

Pat's Story: A family life

I was married in 1947 – sixty seven years ago – but I've been widowed for twenty eight years. I've got four kids. Paul's fifty-five; Anne's fifty-three; Catherine's fifty-two; and John's fifty one. I let taxi drivers know that I'm ninety – nearly ninety-one – and they say "Really!" Some of them are only twenty-something.

The family was my mother and my grandmother, with the surname Mattei. They came out from Switzerland in 1850 and [some of the current family members] have just done a family tree on them.

My grandmother shifted to Wonthaggi. That's where I was born. She had a sweet shop and a tobacco shop next door to each other. She used to make her own ice cream, soda water and everything.

My mother was married and she had six children. I was the second youngest. When I was four and my brother was three, my father up and left us. We were in touch with him. He never ever gave me a present. I used to stay with him sometimes. He said what would I like for my twenty-first? I said "a watch would be nice", and he said "I'll give that" and he never [even] sent me a card. He never bought any of us any presents. He went into hotels for the rest of his life. He met a lady there who was very rich. He was with her. They [Pat's parents] never got divorced, my mother being Catholic. About a week after she died, he married this woman. I saw him now and again and I stayed with him. Three of us liked him and three of us didn't. The three that liked him, we did alright. The other three didn't. I didn't mind him but his wife said to me the first time she met me "you have your father's nose", and I have too. I never spoke to her after that. Just ignored her. My nose seemed to get bigger too!

My mother was a lady. She had never worked in her life. She was the first grandchild and she was the one visiting all the other uncles and aunts. [After] she got married she had to come to Melbourne. She didn't know anything. My brothers and us we all turned out alright. Four boys – one was an electrician, another one was an accountant. Father put him into one of his hotels and he did alright. Another was in building. He ended up in Brazil. He married a Brazilian, stayed there, [but] would come home and visit. He got what I got – low vision. I'm nearly blind. I can hardly see, Macular Degeneration. My nephew also has it, as did his father. My father I believe had a touch of it.

[Mother managed] because Father left her a house in Wonthaggi. No pensions in those days. When she was running short of money she used to say to me "go and see the solicitor and tell him I want some money." So I had to go up to the solicitor [and say] my mother wanted some money. I don't know how she managed quite frankly, the six of us. She had never worked in her life.

I've been barracking for North Melbourne for eighty-five years. I was five when we came down to Melbourne. I knew a lot of the players. My brother used to go out with them. I love Ron Barassi. I've only been to the football twice in my life.

One of my passions was a pair of old-fashioned jugs that were my grandmother's: two little red jugs. One of them had my grandmother's name printed on it. They were from 1914, so they're 100 years old now. My mother got them after my grandmother died; then I got them; and now I've given them to my granddaughter who's thirty. I think about those jugs all the time.

Don

I met Don at Leggetts. He asked me to dance. A terrible dancer he was. I was good because I had been taught. And my girlfriend said, "I think you like him and I think you are going to marry him." Yes that's what she said. And she said "I don't think I'll get married." She died at fifty-five. Alzheimer's.

Anyway Don asked could he take me home, and I said "I'm with my girlfriend." He said "Well we could drop her off first." Anyway we didn't.

I just liked him. I thought he was nice. I said I was going to go to the South Melbourne Town Hall. I'd heard it was good. He'd heard it was good [too]. We got there. That was the start of it I think. He took me home that night.

Every time I saw him I liked him more, [but] he wasn't saying anything. [So] I said "I'm going to Sydney to work." He said "What about me?!" And I said "What about you?" [He said he loved me.] I said "Why didn't you tell me that a few weeks ago?"



Pat's wedding photo

When I took him to see my mother she said "Well I have to tell you, Don, she's got a rotten temper." And he said "But I love her Mrs Nugent!" She said "So don't say I didn't warn you!" Anyway that was when we got engaged. On the Saturday it was. We got the ring on the Monday. We were married about twelve months later.

I don't think he was handsome, but when people see his photo away at the war, medals on him, they say "what a handsome looking bloke!" But anyway, he was a lovely chap. Everybody speaks very highly of him. Very, very nice.

We used to go up to Ferntree Gully every Sunday. We canoodled. We used to go just out in the bush a bit. Nothing improper. Oh no, he wouldn't touch me, not in that way. No. You never left home 'til you got married. Different these days. No, he was lovely, Don.

He was eleven years older than I was. He said to me "How old do you think I am?" one night. I was about twenty-three. I said "about twenty-five". He said "more". I said "twenty-eight". It got to thirty and I said

"Gosh, you are old!" He said "That's why I didn't tell you." He was eleven years older than I was.

We were both working. I used to do the housework on a Friday night. I got tired of it. I went in and said to him, "Are you going to help me?" I said "You can either do the washing or do the vacuum cleaning." So he chose the vacuum cleaning.

Don couldn't even hammer a nail in. I wanted something done in the kitchen and he said he couldn't. And his father was a carpenter! His brother, who was a high executive in the firm that Don went to eventually, built his own home. I used to do the painting in the house and I said to him one day "How about you?" And he said "Oh, but you do it so well!" I enjoyed the painting.

He loved his cricket. He played until he was fifty-five for a team in Windsor. We lived in Prahran. He was a slow bowler. I used to mind my little nephew on a Saturday, so I said "I'll come down and have a look at you." I nearly didn't go with him anymore. He was so slow! Shocking bowler! I nearly gave him up when I saw him! I thought my God he was terrible! But he was eleven years older than I was.

One of my cousins is doing the family tree. She's done a big thing of Don with all the letters I wrote to him and he wrote to me, and all the cards over the years: birthdays, Christmas – 'To my Darling Pat', and so on. That was before we had the kids and even afterwards.

Children

I loved children, and when we couldn't have children I said to Don: "Well, will we adopt?" He said "yes"; but I kept asking and asking him and he'd say "no", he wasn't ready yet; and we waited ten years – ten years! – and in the end I said to him "If we don't adopt soon I'm leaving you!" So we rang up the next day.

In those days you could get them without waiting long; so we got Paul. He's got four children, beautiful children, and he's a grandfather – and I'm a great grandmother to this little one.

Then Anne was the next one, and I remember them ringing me up from St Joseph's, out in Broadmeadows, and they said if we didn't hurry up we'd miss out; so we raced out the next day and we got her. There was an infection at the home where all the other mothers were. They'd have the baby at the Women's Hospital and then they'd go to this home. Because of the infection we had to go to the hospital and feed her. She's the only one that's been christened by us in Baptism.

Then we wanted another girl, so Catherine came; and then Don said "That's enough – we can't afford any more!" He was just a shipping clerk.

But I wanted another boy. I loved boys; I loved them! I babysat boys for twenty years, and I loved babysitting the boys. I've been to two of those boys' weddings.

I rang Don at work and said there was another boy we could have. He rang me back and said "We can't afford it." Then I rang him and said "Too late – I've already rung them up." So he rang back and said "Oh, alright, we'll have a little boy." So we got John, and that was four in four years. Oh dear – it was so funny!

It was a happy family. They all got on very well. I loved them all of course. I was always at the sink when they came home from school and I'd wave to them.

Once on my birthday John came in with this parcel and I said "What is it?", and he said "None of your business. Don't worry." They were at De La Salle at that time, the two boys. Anyway, he couldn't keep anything to himself for long. I asked again "What is it John?", and he said again "None of your business." But he came out about an hour later and said "Oh, I'll have to tell you", even though my birthday was about two weeks away, and he had this set of glasses. Just glasses, eighteen of them in six different sizes, and he had to let me see them.

I didn't work while the kids were at home but I did work a bit afterwards for a printer near home, when they were busy and needed help.

Paul

Paul's fifty-five. He is 6 feet. He is thinnish, not a fat fellow. He's not shy but he's very nice. He was a forklift driver. Then he was in hospitality. He worked at a hotel. He left home when he was about eighteen. He used to come back. Paul wasn't interested [in finding his biological mother].

He has four beautiful children. They live up in Queensland. I'm a great-grandmother. She's the most beautiful little girl. He's got twins who are thirty-one. The other one is fourteen and the boy thirteen. One of the twins got married to an Italian. She is so sweet. They rang me up one day, showed a photo on the I-Phone. The little one, not even two, is going around with a miniature vacuum cleaner. She's saying "cleaning cleaning". Then she said "finished". Oh she's a lovely little thing. His twins are very pretty girls. I think they are. And his other two, they're extraordinary. Boy and a girl, the only boy in the whole family. He's lovely. Lily is fourteen and she's 5 foot 11. She plays basketball and wants to be a vet. She lives on a sort of farm. There've got animals and she loves the animals. They are in NSW.

Paul's with me now at the moment, my carer. He takes care of me, he cooks, takes me in the car to do any shopping. He's very nice. I like him. I love him. I love the lot of them. We always eat our meals together. It's a good size house: three bedrooms and a family room. We meet up in the family room for dinner. I only have breakfast and dinner. I never have any lunch. He's always hungry.

Paul is mad about sport. He follows Collingwood. He follows anybody really. He loves sport. He goes to the football with his friends. He doesn't play sport but he knows all about it. He likes watching cricket, but he doesn't play it. Not like his father.

They are coming down soon, the twin and her husband and the baby. They are coming down in a couple of weeks to stay with me. Then arranging it so the other twin can come and get off work at the same time. So they will all be together with me.

Anne

Anne is a dietician. She knew right from the word go she wanted to be a dietician. She has never been interested [in finding her birth mother].

In grade 6 at school, she wanted to be a dietician, and she was a dietician. The university had just opened up in Geelong, Deakin. My brother had a hotel down there, and they always said if she does go ahead she must live with us, so she did. It was great. It just suited her.

She is the same weight as she was, hasn't put on a bit. She works as a dietician. Anne was married at forty two and [had to wait 'til then] to have a baby.

Her husband is a podiatrist. They are really set, those two. They have just shifted house to East Brighton because Bridget has just started school at Mandeville Hall. She gets a bus. It's all supervised. It's a beautiful school. The fees they charge, it should be! I went down there for Grandma's Day last week, and it was fantastic. I've never seen a school like it. They have the big mansion at the back. The children are all so lovely and polite. I've shrunk a bit. I know I am short. I'm the midget of the family. The two boys are six foot. Bridget is ten. She's as tall as I am, but she is the shortest in the grade. They are all tall kids.

Anne is pretty sociable, had lots of girlfriends. She went up to Newcastle. She was Head of the dietician part up there, in the hospital in Newcastle.

She came back [when she was pregnant with Bridget] because I was getting a bit [old]. I go down there for dinner sometimes. Bridget is such a nice kid [and] rings me up every day, every night. She is a great conversationalist. She does love me. I see her a bit.

Catherine

One of my cousins told me that Catherine was the prettiest of them all. She had lovely hair. She was just beautiful.

Catherine lives in Queensland, very outgoing, always out and about. She travelled around a bit. She went away for quite a while, about ten years.

She got to know her mother. She found her when she was about fifteen. They rang me up from St. Josephs one day and said "Where were you yesterday?" I said "Why?" They said that Catherine was out here trying to find out who her mother was. And she said to me one day "What was my mother's name?" I said "I don't know, Catherine."

Catherine did meet her mother. She was fourteen when she had Catherine. They had a relationship, but it didn't last very long, because she was killed in a car accident. When she was a grandmother she was only about thirty-five I think. Catherine was an office worker. She married at twenty and had [her first] baby. The other two are almost twenty now, and they're my great grandchildren.

She was always out and about, Catherine. She only had one child, a girl. Her daughter Laura has two children. I'm a great-grandmother to these two. They are sixteen and seventeen.

Catherine's daughter is Laura. I used to babysit a little girl called Laura. I was babysitting at the time and these two girls were just delightful. First time I took them out, the older one who was three, said "Buy me a cake!" I said "I couldn't buy you a cake without mummy telling me." "Buy me a cake!" she said it about ten times. She didn't get her cake though. When Catherine had her baby she didn't know what to call her. One of the little girls was Laura. She had met her. She said "I think I will call her Laura", so she called her Laura after the one I babysat for. Catherine is divorced now.

John

He was so good looking. I think he's got some sort of blood in him, don't know if it is Jewish or Italian. You wouldn't know it now – not that he isn't still good looking – but he had lovely hair, and now he hasn't got any! John's popped on a bit of weight. He rang me last night. I said "have you lost any weight?" and he said "yes, a bit."

John's mother found him. She found him ten years before but in those days you couldn't make contact. Then all of a sudden it was made easier. He happened to be home one day from Sydney and a letter came for him. It was from the Catholic people and it said that "Your mother, Eleanor, wants to meet you. Would you be willing?" And he said "Aw, I couldn't be bothered. Maybe later on." He wasn't ready. He was doing a university course in Sydney.

I was livid with the letter! It began: 'Dear John, just in case you don't know, you are adopted.' We took all of the children out and told them they were adopted. But what if we hadn't?! One of John's friends was at the church getting married when his mother told him. Isn't that dreadful? On his wedding day! He was bitter for a long time after that. When John told me,

he rang me up one night. "I've got some news for you. She's found me again." That was his mother. I said "How tall is she?", and he said "pretty tall, about as tall as you, and very nice."

John's Mother, Eleanor

She came down, John's mother. We had lunch and we had a bottle of champagne between us and I liked her. When she came in she had just an ordinary coat on, [and] had gloves. As soon as I opened the door, I knew I liked her. After our lunch [I put on a tape]. John was at the College of The Arts. He got into music and won a scholarship there.

His mother turned out to be a pianist. His father was a band leader. We didn't find out until he was twelve. If we'd known that earlier we could have perhaps done something. He really turned out very well, because he was with Yamaha. He even used to compose things. Very clever.

[Anyway] when he was age twelve he played a concert at Melba Hall. He played this concerto. All his friends were there. They had it taped so I had it on a tape. So we sat down there and I put it on. She [his mother] said "That's lovely! Who's that?" So I said "That's your son." She said "Shh, don't talk." So I gave it to her.

And now we're all happy about it. And I haven't got much longer and he has his family now, another family, and he's very, very happy. But he never talks about it. He keeps telling me how much he loves me. He does really and all his friends tell me too. They all say they love me.

I sent photographs to his mother. She didn't want photographs of him as an adult. She wanted photos of him as a child; so I sent her all of these photographs starting with his music and so on.

John was in Sydney for about ten years. He wasn't making any money. He's got a lot of up and go but there was no money there. So after about ten years he gave that away and someone got him a job with Telstra. He ended up as Manager of Telstra Yellow Pages in Sydney. Then he went to Singapore for a holiday and the thing just jumped into his lap and he is now the editor of this magazine, just for the Australians. Doesn't have stories, just things to sell. He has a whole page every month. He gets invitations to go to Thailand, Java. He's been there for six years and he loves it. It was my ninetieth last year – 27th of September – and he arranged a party and paid for it. Came down from Singapore. It was great! I've kept every card he's sent to me. John rings me about twice a week, and he also rings Paul on his phone. They are good friends. They are all close. They are all nice kids. I love them.

Eleanor has kept up a good relationship with John, and with me too. She's fourteen years younger than me. She married and had two girls. She got divorced from him. She was a very good Catholic. She married another chappie. He's very nice. He's a grandfather. It's very nice.

Conclusion

Don was from a family of four. His father bought this grave site down in Brighton. It holds six people. Father has four children and his wife, that's six. It turned out he paid ten pound for it. That's for six people. And I'm going there because his brother had gone with his wife. And

when we went out to look at it, at one stage they told us that twelve people could go there for ten dollars. Twelve people but they had to be cremated. Just lift the thing up and pop them in. I'm safe anyway, I'm going there.

Note from the editors: Pat brought a handwritten note from Paul to one of the workshops. The note, which included the comment that 'she totally encourages all her family', sings Pat's praises from beginning to end!



Paula reading to Pat



Sylvie reading, Liz assisting

A Family Member's View: Liz Hudson's reflections on the project

The project provided a fantastic opportunity to hear and record stories of my parents' lives that may have otherwise been lost. Over the years Dad has told us many stories, but if he hadn't written them down, I'm not sure I would have remembered them. I still enjoy hearing stories about my grandparents and great grandparents, even though I didn't know them all personally, and it will be good to be able to pass on my parents' stories to my grandchildren (and my children, when they decide they are interested, in thirty years or so!).

In Mum's case, she has occasionally told snippets of her life, but she certainly wouldn't have written them down, and unfortunately the memories she generally held onto were the 'bad' ones – e.g., how when I was about a month old, she was holding me in a baby blanket and I fell out, hitting my head. As I now have issues with headaches (have for many years), she was worried that this was caused by the fall as a baby, even though the health centre nurse said I was fine. Hearing more of Mum's story has helped with my understanding of the struggles she has faced throughout her life. Typing these stories also reinforced the stories in my mind, as so often I forget what I'm told (perhaps I don't always listen as attentively, especially to Dad, as I should!)

It has been interesting to hear what memories they have held onto, what they consider important life stories to share, and what memories have faded over time.

I think the project had enormous benefit for both Mum and Dad, but particularly for Mum. Dad is a natural storyteller and always keen to talk about all the good things he has done (good Christian, good school teacher etc.). For Mum to have the opportunity to recall and share some of her stories I think was very important for her self-esteem and self-worth. In more recent years she has told people that she was never good at school because that side of her brain didn't work well, but the 'creative' side of her brain was better, and she is very proud now of her achievements in art, crafts and cake decorating, and her love of singing, but I think having the opportunity to actually share those stories and have them written down, through the project, has made a world of difference to her confidence.

I think the project is of enormous value to other participants, both those telling their stories and those hearing or recording them. I think it is so important for participants to be able to share their stories and be affirmed of their worth in the lives they have lived. Several times I recall Pat, in the sessions I attended, saying that her life was 'ordinary', but when she shared her stories, they showed what a full, life she had and reaffirmed her worth as a person (not 'just a Mum', 'just a housewife' etc). I think often it's not until people are given the opportunity to really reflect on their lives, that they realise and can acknowledge their self-worth and their impact on, or contribution to, the lives of others. I believe giving people an opportunity to share their stories, whether positive or negative, are essential in helping individuals find a kind of peace, understanding or way of putting events into context in relation to the whole of their lives. Journeying with a person through sharing their story enables the person to feel heard, affirmed and worthy. Stories from older people tell us of different times, different values, different experiences than those of younger people today. We have so much to learn from our elders, and the knowledge and understanding of the rich history of extraordinarily 'ordinary lives' would otherwise be lost, if there weren't avenues to record some of these stories – it would only be those capable of writing and publishing books that would have the opportunity to do so otherwise.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share in this project. It was great hearing Mum able to recall stories from her past, even though she has no idea what happened yesterday or even an hour ago. I hope to be able to continue conversations with Mum about her life, and I know Dad has written much of his life story now, with more stories coming to mind regularly (it's become an obsession for Dad, whose short term memory is also deteriorating).



Len and Liz with dolls

Tentative conclusions by the Facilitators

Based on the above, we offer the following tentative conclusions. We expect to be able to reach firmer and better-evidenced conclusions after we conduct a second project of this kind, this time with more rigorous qualitative, and an additional quantitative component of assessment.

- In one instance, the cognitive and social capacities of a participant far exceeded what had been expected by Brindabilla staff.
- All participants proved to be very good listeners and contributors and exhibited excellent social skills throughout.
- Pat and Sylvie appeared to derive substantial benefit from the project in terms of morale, self-esteem and sense of purpose (Len, seemed solid in these terms from the outset). It was noticeable that Pat, who lacked confidence at the outset, grew in confidence as the project unfolded.
- It was encouraging that at least two of the group expressed a wish and indeed determination to continue writing about their lives after the project.
- No major difficulties arose, but the fact that 'staying on theme' proved difficult at times, and that two of the participants showed a strong tendency to repeat material, is a significant 'finding'.

- It is not possible to say whether cognitive 'gains' – in the sense of improved performance attributable to slowing or even reversing of the neurological causes of memory difficulty – were made; but when the project is run for a second time quantitative testing methods will be employed which may shed some light on this complex issue. Certainly improved cognitive performance was noted, but this may simply be attributable to improved morale, social stimulation and the all-important fact that other people were taking a deep and genuine interest in the authors and their life-stories.
- The presence of an involved and supportive family member – Liz – was of great benefit all-round.
- The Facilitators greatly enjoyed the project and found that their areas of expertise and their shared love of life-story telling made for a rich and rewarding collaboration. The project affirmed the enormous power and importance of such story-telling, not just as a way of 'reporting' on the life already lived, but enhancing the life still under way.

Observations by those involved

The participants:

Len.

"I've got up in the middle of the night to add something, get back, got up again to add more."

"Drew me out of things I had almost forgotten."

Sylvie.

"It's been great. I feel it's reminding me of things that had happened in years gone by that I had forgotten."

Pat.

"I've loved it."

Referring to producing the book: "I'm so excited about it."

Brindabilla staff:

Di (Brindabilla Volunteer.)

“I felt privileged to hear the stories, to have got into their lives.”

Tania (Program Co-ordinator)

“This is why I joined aged care. You get to be part of their family and learn about their past. It is a privilege to be part of their life. ”

Caroline (Program Manager)

“The life story project was a positive collaboration between the Bapcare Home Care Packages and Day Centre programs, which provided an opportunity for clients to increase their social participation and self-confidence, and for the staff from both programs to work together for the first time on a project alongside our clients. The Project also resulted in a stimulating activity for the clients involved and was insightful for staff. We were privileged to be able to partake in such a beneficial project with Professor Freadman and I would like to thank Richard, Paula, the Brindabilla staff and most importantly the Brindabilla clients, for their participation and work in the project. We are looking forward to the next project and client stories that await.”

Richard.

“It has been a pleasure to work with Sylvie, Pat and Len, the Brindabilla staff and Paula Bain on this project. It has been a real team effort. I've loved hearing our clients' stories and seeing the pleasure they have gained from telling them. They all have rich stories to tell and have told them really well.”

Paula.

“Meeting together weekly for our Life Story Project has been a real highlight of my working week. Being part of getting to know each other and sharing our rich stories has been a treat. No one missed a session and the enthusiasm between us all just grew as the weeks progressed. It has been a very rich and meaningful project and great learning for everyone involved.”