

# 10. Back To School

## Making Ends Meet

From the time I was married, I spent 15 years doing shift work between the Echuca Flour Mill and Echuca Ball Bearing Factory and I had had enough of shift work.

Over the next few years I took on a number of different jobs to make ends meet. We moved to the Goulburn Valley so I could get work at the Shepparton Abattoirs where I was working with my brother Brien for some time and Brenda was working as a domestic with Goulburn Valley Base Hospital. I then moved over to Pullar's orchard at Ardmona as an orchard hand and Brenda as a fruit grader and packer until 1982 when my brother Brien asked us to come and help him on a cattle station at Balranald in central New South Wales for 12 months. Brenda and I immediately packed up and headed up there for a while, but after six months we were sick of the dust and isolation, so returned to our home in Echuca Village. I started working at the Yoplait Yoghurt factory. But I was now back in the factory scene, not getting any younger and still dreaming of a better life. The kids had now left home, with Shoanna our youngest now out working as an apprentice chef, so it was time to start focusing on our own future.

At 49 years of age I did the Public Service test and finally had a chance to move out of the hard jobs and into something a little easier, where I could progress. So, long story short, I passed and started working for the Department of Social Security in Shepparton, Sale and Mildura over the next 15 years.

## The Passing of Nanny Pris

Dear Nanny Pris passed away in 1982 and according to the Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria, she was 95 years old. That age may be a little contentious because I think for about six years she was telling everyone she was 99 going on 100 and was all set to receive a telegram from Queen Elizabeth. Most of us are putting our ages down – Nanny was putting hers up. Sadly, she never *did* get that telegram.

Nanny was an enormous part of my life from the time of my birth, especially in my early years when she raised me, and later in helping Brenda and I get started, and in being a confidante and support throughout my adult life. She lost Pop Mackray in 1966, but lived on for another two decades, supporting her family and raising many of her grandkids.



**Nanny Priscilla Mackray.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

As you know Nanny Priscilla Mackray took in my cousin Fay (Carter), Dimpsey (Johnson) and me, when I was about seven years old. Then after our Mum died, Nanny took in my siblings Keith, Brien and Carmel and raised us all together, while Dad was out working. But we weren't the only kids she raised. In around

1955 Nanny also took in Dad's brother, Keith's kids, Carol, Gary, Brian and Kevin. Carol tells us she was only four years old then and Kevin was three months old. Carol says that they 'really had a mother in Nanny'.

Carol fondly remembers Nanny and what a generous woman she was:

She was always cooking for people, cooking up a feed for someone in need. She would go without to give to others. She always had someone over on a Sunday, mainly her sisters Aunty Becky and Aunty Louie. Sometimes Aunty Louie would come and stay with us if she was working at the fruit cannery.

Nanny and Aunty Becky were very close. Aunty Becky would come over once a year and people would bring boxes and boxes of fruit and tomatoes and they would bottle and bottle them... tomatoes, pears, apricots, peaches etc. They'd boil the tomatoes and then yell out to us kids that they had a job for us and we would have to come in and skin the loads of boiled tomatoes.

They must have had a good relationship because every Shepparton Show time, they would make up their picnics, every Saturday after church<sup>1</sup> at sunset and watch the big arena events for the closing of the show; while us kids would go off to the sideshows.

Whilst Nanny was a big-hearted generous woman, she was also pretty hard on us kids. When we were in trouble with her, we were too scared to walk in the back door. The boys use to come in the bedroom and put jumpers and long pants on (lots of layers) and crawl under the bed hiding from Nanny and the strap.

Another time, she couldn't wake them up so she put the garden hose through the window and the boys were jumping and running everywhere as the cold water gushed into their room. She expected the boys to be up digging the garden early in the morning; 6.30/7am they would be out there digging with shovels so she could plant her veggies.

Nanny Pris was a hard woman like her mother Granny Ada James (nee Cooper) and us kids all got to see that side of her from time to time. But deep inside Nanny was a soft, loving and giving woman and I know that many of her Grandchildren including me would have been lost without her.

And now, today, as I go to the cemetery here at Mooroopna in Victoria, to visit my darling Mum, I see Nanny Pris' name there on the same headstone with her. You see, Nanny and Mum were so close, that when Nanny's time finally did

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1 In the Seventh Day Adventist Church Sabbath is on Saturday.

come in 1985, she insisted that she be buried with my Mum, her daughter-in-law. And so two of the four<sup>2</sup> great ladies of my life, who gave me the only homes I ever had, lie there together at peace in the 'Dreaming'.

We all remember Nanny Priscilla Mackray's beautiful cooking skills and now my cousin Carol Collie (nee Nelson) shares a couple of our most favourite of Nanny's recipes with you – her scone and custard sponge recipes.



**My cousin Carol Collie (nee Nelson).**

Source: Courtesy Carol Collie (nee Nelson).

## Nanny's Recipes

### Scones

2 cups of Self Raising Flour

Pinch of Salt

Butter (enough butter to make breadcrumbs when rub the butter and flour together)

Add 2 eggs

And as much Milk as needed to make dough.

Roll out the dough to about 1 inch thick.

Cut into scone sizes with a knife, cake cutter or top of a glass.

Wipe a little milk on top of each.

Bake in a moderate oven 350 degrees.

## Custard Sponge

4 eggs

1 small cup of Custard powder

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup Castor Sugar

2 level teaspoons of Cream of Tartar and Bicarbonate of Soda

Beat eggs and sugar for 15 mins

Add dry ingredients and mix

Line and grease two 2 x 8 inch tins

Add cake mix to tins

Bake in a moderate oven 350 to 375 degrees for 20 mins.

## Finding our Way

My brothers and sister and I had a fractured start to life in many ways, but the family around us instilled in us the importance of work and education. We struggled along for some years before we were able to get ourselves into the position to find what we wanted to do with our lives.

## My Brother Keith

My brother Keith really led the way, having been a house painter for some years in Melbourne and had really solidified himself in the industry before settling in Brighton, Melbourne.

But the rest of us were still trying to find our way. Thankfully the late 1980s to early 1990s were a real turning point in life for Carmel, Brien and me.





**My brother Keith and me in 1982, at Balranald. This photo reminds me of those two little boys sitting on our fathers lap.**

Source: GBRN Collection.



**My sister Carmel Barry.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

## My Sister Carmel

In 1982 my sister Carmel was studying the Aboriginal Welfare Assistants course at Watsonia in Melbourne, and this changed her life. She was now able to step into a role that was to lead her to have an incredible impact on prison reform in

Victoria. She went on to work for the Office of Corrections as the State Manager of the Aboriginal Unit working with prisons across the state. And she was the perfect person to be in this state-wide role given her strong voice, knowledge, and the respect she had from everyone she came into contact with within the prison system.

## My Brother Brien

My brother Brien had moved into working as an Aboriginal Ranger with Parks Victoria, and was now able to share his wealth of cultural and historical knowledge with those responsible for the management of our forests, parks and cultural sites across the state. He also went on to establish Jaara Jaara Aboriginal Corporation through which he, with the support of Carmel and me, became the leading figure in Aboriginal cultural heritage on Dja Dja Wurrung country especially from the 2000s when he returned to live 'on country'.



**My brother Brien Nelson on the occasion of welcoming the Dalai Lama to Dja Dja Wurrung country.**

Source: Courtesy Justice Nelson.

## My Scholarship

In late 1988 I was working at the Department of Social Security in Mildura when an opportunity came across my desk; it was about Aboriginal Study Scholarships. I decided to apply, thinking this would be a great chance for me to return to study, on full pay and get the education I was never able to before.

I received a scholarship to study the Aboriginal Administration degree at the University of Adelaide. So with Brenda's blessing we both packed up and moved to Adelaide, where Brenda started working as a domestic at the Adelaide Hospital. I put my head down and got into my studies.

It was a real challenge for me to start studying at university level at the age of 55, but thankfully I had always been an avid reader and loved to learn new things, so this really got me going.



**My graduation, 1992.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

## A Kid in a Candy Store

I was like a kid in a candy store with access to major libraries and archives, including a vast array of Maloga Mission historical documents. Whilst studying,



I was also searching again, for all that I could find, relating to Grampa. I managed to get my hands on a wide range of letters written by Grampa in his role as school teacher at Maloga and Cummeragunga. It seems that Grampa was constantly writing to the Aborigines Protection Board (APB) and School Inspectors about the rights of Aboriginal children at Maloga and Cummeragunga Missions. He saw such injustice for our Aboriginal children in the quality of materials, books, equipment, furniture, and building space in his schools, and was begging for improved conditions for his students.

These letters gave me a better sense of Grampa the school teacher and how committed he was to Aboriginal children, adults and their families; how much he had made a life amongst our people; and how much he too suffered as a black man in Australia. But I will write more about that later. What I had not expected to find was the equally large number of letters written by Grampa's son Shadrach (Shady) James. He too had apparently taken on a pivotal role in our community, as Secretary of the Aborigines Progressive Association in Mooroopna, working alongside Uncle William Cooper for some time, writing to the government fighting for the rights of Aboriginal people, not only at Cummeragunga, or Victoria, but in Australia.

At the end of my degree, I started to write my thesis titled 'Grampa James and the Yorta Yorta People' based on Grampa's life and legacy to our mob. However, at the end of the day, I came away from university with an incomplete thesis and a burning desire to continue my research and complete Grampa's story. This story now has grown out of that unfinished thesis.

I returned to my role as Aboriginal Liaison Officer at the Mildura Department of Social Security, finished my 15 years of service and retired. Brenda and I then returned to our little home at Echuca Village here in Victoria, not far from Cummeragunga where it all started, to enjoy our retirement together. This quiet time gave me a chance to start thinking about Grampa again and all that I had learnt about him during my life. And now this following section will give me the chance to share with you all that I have found so far.