

2. Nanny's Stories

The Romance

I spent a lot of time with Nanny Pris throughout my childhood and she used to love telling me stories about her life, our old people and the days of Maloga and Cummeragunga Missions, and, particularly, the story of her romance with Grandfather George.

Nanny Pris fell for the tall handsome George Nelson (the first), the sixth child of nine kids, sometime in the early 1900s. His family (Grandfather Henry Harmony, Granny Mag and their children) had moved between Framlingham, Mt Franklin, Coranderrk and Lake Tyers,¹ before settling at Cummera, 250 km from Coranderrk but I can't tell you exactly when. Nanny Pris told me that she and Grandfather George would look for opportunities to meet, but never really about how they got started. I always figured that they grew up on Cummera together.² She said they used to 'meet at the toilets at Cummera for a cuddle' as that was the only chance they had for some private time without the whole mob knowing about it. As you can imagine around Cummera at the time it wouldn't have been easy to keep the secret of a blossoming romance. They were a very attractive young couple, the tall dark handsome man and the young woman with exotic Aboriginal and Indian features.



A young Priscilla James (Nanny Pris).

Source: GBRN Collection.

1 According to Museum Victoria records, it is understood that Granny Mag had an aunt named Charlotte and cousins living at Lake Tyers.

2 Some Museum Victoria records show that Grandfather George the First was born in 1892 at Barmah, but other museum and archival records show the family only moved to Cummera in 1895/96 from Coranderrk.

Grandfather George, his brothers and his father Henry spent a lot of their time clearing the land at Cummeragunga. Back in 1888 some land was given to different men to work for their families and Dad told me that Grandfather Henry's block of land was on the way up to the Cummera cemetery. It is there they grew veggies and fruit for sale or trade at Granny's store.

But the Aborigines Protection Board (APB) seized the family blocks on Cummera in 1908; so Grandfather George had to go looking for seasonal work off Cummera. There is a long story to the farm blocks at Cummera, which I will tell you about later as it really blends into this story of Grampa James but for now I want to share with you my father-in-law Ron Morgan's recollections of that time when our men were given the farm blocks and started to clear them for farming. Ron wrote about these times in his book *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunga and Its Aboriginal People* (1952):

The portion of the Station known as Ulunja was measured into blocks and given to the more able men of the place to clear and work for themselves. The men worked hard clearing and fencing in their allotted blocks, receiving the station rations while doing so. In between times they would go to the shearing and other seasonal work outside the Station. Working untiringly as they did, many got their land cleared and had the pleasure of having a crop off it. There were still others who reached the stage of clearing their land but never had the opportunity of getting a crop. Something unforeseen was discovered. Having no horses or implements of their own, what the Station had were insufficient to supply the needs of all. What was to be done? The Board, then known as the APB, decided to work the land on a community system, the revenue going to the upkeep of the Station. This was eventually done much to the resentment of the Aborigines and has been one of the life-long grievances of Cummeragunga. Most of the men who held these blocks have passed on to the Great Beyond.

Teaching

Nanny Pris became a teacher's assistant to her father at the Cummera School and on her application to Inspector Lynch on 25 February 1910 she committed herself to obtaining whatever Kindergarten training she needed for the role. She was still going steady with Grandfather George, but her parents Grampa James and Granny Ada wouldn't allow them to marry until she was 22 years old. Their love survived the wait and they were eventually married on 5 January 1911 and my father George was born later that same year.



Young Grandfather George Nelson (the first) sitting, with Les Briggs.

Source: GBRN Collection.

After my Dad's birth, Grandfather George had to find work up and down the Murray River and across country chopping wood and shearing to make ends meet while Nanny Pris was home raising their son. They lived this way for the

next ten years, and, amazingly, still went on to have a large family. This was not unusual, for as my father-in-law Ronald Morgan noted in his abovementioned book: 'The Station at this time had a large population and, although the majority of the menfolk went to work outside the Station, it was customary to come back for weekend or other recess.'

When my father was 11 years old with six siblings, Grandfather George went off to work on the construction of the Torrumbarry Weir west of Echuca.



My father George Nelson (the second) and his sister Iris (Atkinson).

Source: GBRN Collection.

The Tragic Accident

Grandfather George was working at Torrumbarry Weir in Victoria along the Murray River, with a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men. Some were family and others were friends. At the site, Grandfather was responsible for controlling the huge cement scoops (steering, scooping and emptying) while another person would be controlling the horses that were towing the scoops. One day in 1923 the horses towing the scoops ran right over Grandfather and dragged the scoops across him too, leaving him with horrific injuries and his life hanging in the balance. It was touch and go for a while, however he surprised everyone and eventually recovered from that accident, or so it seemed.

Then, six months later, after leaving hospital and getting on with life he suddenly took a turn for the worse. He was rushed to Echuca hospital from Cummera by horse and cart but it was too late. He passed away soon after arrival at the hospital, and according to his death certificate, his cause of death was noted as a fractured pelvis, perforated bowel and peritonitis. It would seem that these were injuries from his accident six months prior that may well have gone undetected, eventually leading to his death on 21 November 1923.

It is also noted on his death certificate that Grampa James was present when his son-in-law passed away and according to family members over the years, he was a tower of strength to his daughter who was now without the man she loved, the father of her seven children. Dad was only 12 years old at the time; he was the oldest child and never got over the loss of his father. In fact he held a lot of anger inside him throughout his life, with his own personal view about who was to blame for his father's death. Who that was is not for me to mention here now; but Dad relayed that story to me many times and was very clear about where he felt responsibility lay, on the job, the day his father was so tragically injured.

The loss of Grandfather George was so difficult to bear that Nanny Pris felt she had no other alternative but to pack up her kids at the end of 1923 and head to Melbourne to live with her parents Grampa James and Granny Ada in Fitzroy where they had moved following Grampa's retirement from teaching in 1922. They were a great support to her while she went off to work at McRobertson's Chocolate Factory.

As the oldest child Dad immediately stepped into more of a big brother/fathering role to help his Mum, Granny Ada and Grampa. His brother Keith took on a paper-route and started earning a little money that way. Sadly, one day while Uncle Keith was out riding around by tram to do his usual paper-route, he had a very nasty accident as he was jumping on and off local trams. A tram ran over one of his feet severing all but one of his toes. This was yet another stressful time for the family who were still suffering in the aftermath of Grandfather

George's passing. From this point forward Grampa James became a father figure to his grandkids and they all formed a deep bond that would last with them the rest of Grampa's life.



Nanny Pris and her children: left to right: Iris (Atkinson), my father George, Keith, seated: Nanny Pris, Ruby (Near), Lulla (Grant), seated in front: Margaret (Saunders) and Bay (Atkinson).

Source: GBRN Collection.

Nanny and her kids all stayed in Melbourne until Nanny got word from her sister Louisa that they were looking for a cook on a sheep station in Queensland where Auntie Louisa and Uncle Charlie Muir were now living. So Nanny quickly

packed up her kids again, dropped them at her in-laws (Grandfather Henry and Granny Mag's home at Cummera) and headed to Queensland. Grampa James and Granny Ada were getting quite elderly by now and so leaving them at Cummera with Grandfather Henry and Granny Mag meant that they would be back 'on country' in familiar surroundings, supported by extended family and friends on the mission; a much better life for them than staying in the big city.

The New Beginning

It was in Queensland working on the station that Nanny Pris met a new man and found love again. He was Hurtle Mackray, a Ngarrinjeri man from Wellington in South Australia. Pop was the son of Charlotte Muckray of Wellington, South Australia; I was never told who his father was. Nanny and Pop married fairly quickly and together they built a life and he took on her family with much love and respect for each and every one of them.

Nanny and Pop tried to have a family together, but after the loss of their first baby Violet³ they never tried again. They then focused on raising Nanny Pris' grandchildren – the next generation. Before he met Nanny Pris, Pop Mackray had enlisted in the Australian Army on 26 November 1914 at Oaklands, South Australia. His Australian Army Personnel file notes that he served in the 3rd Light Horse Regiment in Kantara Egypt and Gallipoli (9 May 1915) before transferring to the Australian Imperial Force on 28 August 1916. He told me that he was a trained sniper. He was discharged from the service on 11 August 1919.

On his return home it was reported in the *Country Newspaper*, Port Pirie (South Australia), that:

On 12 August 1919 on returning to Wellington, a welcome home social was given to Lance Corporal Slater, and Privates John Taylor and Hurtle Muckray at which they were presented with medals by the Tailem Bend Committee.

Regardless of his experiences at war, he was a quiet, calm and loving man who I never saw have a drink in my childhood. If he had a drink it was out of sight of us kids and to this day I appreciate that. Having always been a good worker, earning a very good income, Pop was forever concerned about being forced to pay tax. So, as he told me, in an effort to make it hard for the Tax Department to find him, he changed the spelling of his name from Muckray⁴ to Mackray. It seemed to work.

³ Carol Collie (nee Nelson) informant.

⁴ Australian Army records enlisted name.

Dad and Pop Mackray

Dad didn't really take to Pop Mackray so well at first. Dad grieved his father for years and no new man was going to take his place. Not that Pop ever tried to do that. In 1928, when Dad was 17, he started working in the forests cutting wood in areas such as Barmah Lakes and Barmah Island (thinning out the forest); then up to Moonahcullah Mission near Deniliquin for shearing.



Pop Hurtle Mackray.

Source: GBRN Collection.

He worked around these areas back and forth for about three years when he suddenly laid eyes on my Mum at Moonahcullah – and they were married there.