

## 7. Starting Out

### My Beautiful Wife

Brenda was born at Cummeragunga on 5 March 1935. Her parents were Ron Morgan and Ella Morgan (nee Cooper) and she was the second youngest of ten children; she had six brothers and three sisters: Irene, Stafford, Ronnie (Hairy), Albert (Doodah), Lydia, Ernie, Jimmy, June and Bagot. The Morgans were a big mob and a very closeknit family full of love, respect and great support for each other. So, you can imagine the challenge I had when I first started out with Brenda because of all those brothers keeping an eye on me! It took a while to win them over but when they eventually realised I was serious, they let their guard down and welcomed me into the family.

But now I want to tell you a bit about Brenda, so I'll start by sharing with you a letter she wrote to our daughter Robynne back in 1998 in an effort to shut up Robynne's incessant questions about Brenda's life story. Here's part of Brenda's story from a letter she wrote to our daughter Robynne in 1998:

I grew up on Cummera, went to school there and finished up at 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Although I loved going to school I was disappointed not having the proper education. I couldn't understand why I couldn't go on to High School. I often remember watching the Austin girls walking across the paddocks at Cummera to catch the school bus to Echuca High School, and I remember asking my mum "why can't I go?" and she said "because you aren't allowed to go" and for the life of me I still couldn't understand it.

I guess the only things we did learn was the knitting, sewing and other things like craft, & making things. I really loved making baskets – that was really great. When the war broke out I could remember we lived on rations but we survived. While at school we were sent up to the Manager's house for our cup of cocoa and sandwich every day.

It wasn't all bad back then, we were happy. We always made our own entertainment. We would have singalongs with Sandy and Dan Atkinson providing the music, and dancing.

In 1948 they had a back to Cummera celebration. There were a lot of people there even had a Miss Cummera which my cousin Ella Williams won.

Rob this is something I have never spoken of, but I used to sing a lot in school. Mr Austin our teacher asked me if I would sing "No Place like Home". At the time I didn't think it was a bad idea – then when the time come and I got up to sing and seen all the people I started singing alright, then started bawling instead. I was such a sook.

I was flower girl for my sister Lydia's wedding, but I did the same thing, and nearly wrecked my poor sister's day. But I must have grown out of it because the Briggs, Aunty Ellen and Uncle Eddie Atkinson used to put on concerts all around the towns. And guess who used to tap dance? Yes me, and your Aunty Melva (Johnson). Melva still laughs about it. I was dressed up as the boy and Melva the girl, and it was called Little Mister Baggy Britches, and they always looked for more. We used to think we were wonderful.

During those years we always went up to the Cummera cemetery every Sunday without fail, to do the graves up, which was a great thing to do then.

In 1950 mum decided to move us off Cummera up to the punt at Barmah. The boys built the hessian hut and that's where we stayed for awhile. Mum used to rise about 5am every morning.

After my sister Irene died, we took in my nephew Albie (Heland) who was born the same day his mum died. And so mum would rise early and bath him. She had a thing about that. And she would turn the radio up full bore to listen to country and western and wake everybody up. I remember the lady I worked with remarking on the loud music coming from across the river. I didn't tell her whose place it was coming from.

Then when the floods came we moved to Moira Station where dad and the boys worked. And I used to ride the bike from there to Barmah to the shop for mum and dad. (That's a long way).

We moved back to the punt for awhile, then I went to Sydney with sister Lydia, Jimmy and their daughter Daisy after their little boy Teddy died in his father's arms on the way to Echuca.

I had a job in the wool factory looking after the machines, until mum came and made me come home. I came home just in time to see cousin Merle marry Alick Jackomos in March 1951. 12 months later I married dad, and the rest you know!!!

Brenda mentions the concerts that used to be held at Cummera and in surrounding areas, and her father Ron Morgan also wrote about these:

The people were not without their recreation as in later years. For there were many good organisers of sport of both sexes among the Aborigines

and they were responsible for promoting many kinds of entertainment on the place. Such functions were often patronised by many of the white population of the surrounding district. They held processions in which were shown by the dress of the characters much skill and patience of the womenfolk. They held concerts of various kinds and dancing. (Morgan 1952)

## St Vitus Dance

When Brenda was a child she had St Vitus Dance which caused her to shake uncontrollably. St Vitus Dance is known to be a complication of rheumatic fever which Brenda had as a child. Her parents tried everything to help heal her and it especially troubled her father who desperately tried to find a cure for her. He was in constant despair that he couldn't heal his daughter. One day he was so distraught that he went missing. A search party went out looking for him and he was eventually found down at an old well at Cummera sitting on the edge, contemplating ending his life.

Now, knowing Ron, he was the most loving, proud, father and distinguished gentleman; to have him come to such an extreme point only shows just how deeply depressed he was over the condition of his daughter. But eventually those out searching for him found him and he was able to 'heal' in time. Fortunately, he then took Brenda to see Grampa James who Brenda had always credited as healing her from the 'shakes' with his herbal mixtures.

She went on to be a fun loving child, happy and healthy and who loved to run and play alone across the Cummera paddocks; she could be gone for hours until finally her Mum would send brother Doodah to go and get her. He dreaded doing this because he knew she wouldn't come. But he eventually had to resort to frightening her to come home. He'd call 'Brennnndaaa, the planes are coming', and she would run like the wind! She was really terrified of aeroplanes and that was all he could do to move her. Brenda and Doodah always loved to laugh about those times.

Brenda and her family spent their time living on Cummeragunga; they also had a home over the Murray River opposite the Barmah Pub for some time; they lived up at Moira Lakes (the New South Wales side of the Murray, while her father worked at Moira Station); or they were over on the Flat at Mooroopna on a seasonal basis.



Source: Courtesy of YYNAC, GBRN Collection.

Note: A full-size version of this map is available on the ANU Press website.

## A Working Life

### Odd Jobs

As a young bloke (before I got married) I tried my hand at a few jobs; as well as working with Dad on the woodcutting at Barmah and Bunbartha and shearing with Pop Mackray, I worked on the hydro electric scheme in the mountains near Mt Beauty, and painting houses with Uncle Lynch Cooper in and around Wangaratta, Numurkah and Benalla. But once Brenda and I got married, it was time to really settle into something more permanent, so that I could provide for my wife. So after our wedding we went and stayed with Aunty Margaret (Markie) and Uncle Les Saunders at Rushworth for a couple of weeks until we could afford to buy a tent. Then we headed off to 'Scrubby' (a dam over at Wanalta near Rushworth in Victoria) so I could start woodcutting for Jackson's in Rushworth. They used to supply wood to the butter factory in Stanhope at the time. After all the years of watching how woodcutting was taking a huge toll on my father's thin body, it was now the only option available to me. And I was a lot lighter than Dad ever was (I weighed about 7 ½ stone (47 kg)). Brenda and I were living out there on our own and Pop Mackray lent us his old Chevy car so we could get around. I would chop the wood, then stack it up in three-foot high piles and get paid every week or so. Jackson's would come out to measure and count the wood piles and then pay me accordingly.

At night Brenda and I would be utterly exhausted but we would sit around the campfire dreaming together about our future, our hopes of buying our own home some day and having children. We lived out there for a month or so until Pop Mackray needed his car back to go shearing. So we had to pack up and head back to the Flat with him. When we got back my Aunty Iris (Dad's sister) was over for a visit from Echuca. She told me I could probably get a job at the Echuca Flour Mill. We were all for it, especially because Brenda was now pregnant.

### The Flour Mill

I started working at the Echuca Flour Mill near the end of 1952 the same year we got married. This job involved working three continually rotating shifts and lifting heavy bags of pollard (140 pounds), bran (108 pounds), and flour (150 pounds). Although the shift work was heavy-going it kept me in regular employment for 16 of the next 25 years. Shift work was the only work available for me in Echuca and on the positive side I never had to outlay any money for weight training as I always got all of the exercise I needed at work lumping flour, pollard and bran bags, for 40 hours every week!

At the flour mill I was 19 years old and being paid junior rates because in those days you had to be 21 to be paid the adult rate, even if you were married. My



take home pay was eight pound nine shillings and sixpence (\$16.95) a week and our weekly rent for a Housing Commission house was four pounds seven shillings and sixpence (\$8.75) a week, or more than half my pay.

One day in 1959 Neil Ross, my foreman at the flour mill, told me that if I could do the flour packerman's job I could have it and he would talk to the mill manager, Mr Templeman, about finally paying me adult rates. That is, if I didn't tell anyone that I was getting paid adult wages at 19 years of age. Of course I accepted and my wages went up to 11 pounds 19 shillings and sixpence a week (\$23.95). I was made!

There was only one problem with this new job. I had put some weight on since the wood chopping but I still only weighed eight stone ten lbs (55 kg) and the flour bags were 150 lbs (70 kg). The bags of flour would drop off the packer with monotonous regularity every two minutes. That is 30 bags an hour, day and night for each of the eight-hour shifts. The packerman had to lift two tons of flour each and every hour of his eight-hour shift that amounted to 4500 lbs or just over 16 tons of flour each shift.

If the packerman did not take the bags of flour off immediately (and then sew them up by hand), to keep the packer empty, the flour running into the packer would back up into the overhead hopper. If the hopper overflowed it would pour flour down on top of the packerman. The packerman then had to stand directly under this hopper and work in the blinding, suffocating shower of flour until he could run off the flour in bags and empty the hopper. It was enormous pressure and very dangerous work.

## The Promotion

After three years working on the flour packer Neil Ross promoted me to the wheat cleaning department as a smutterman. I was now responsible for maintaining three floors crammed full of wheat cleaning machinery and a tunnel 30 feet underground which contained the outlets from the wheat silos and which serviced the flour mill. The other two smuttermen and I had to keep the wheat cleaning section running almost continuously for 24 hours a day without allowing any long stoppages. That is, for three shifts, 120 hours a week. If the smuttermen stopped the wheat cleaning section for too long and ran out of cleaned wheat, the mill could not operate and then the smuttermen were in big trouble because the mill had to be kept running continuously to maintain the mill average and to keep their profit level up.

## Starting our Home

### Boarding

Aunty Iris put us up for a while, while Brenda was pregnant, until Aunty Louise Atkinson gave us a room in her house at Hovell Street, Echuca. It was a tiny room so we weren't there too long before we moved to Gloucester House (a boarding house) where we rented a room for seven shillings and five pence. Then Mrs Baker our landlord at Gloucester House offered us two rooms so we could use one as a kitchen and the other a bedroom. She offered to put a table and chairs in for us so that's what we did. It's while we were there that our first child George Leslie was born – George the Fourth.

### A Real Home

We soon got a house beside the alley way leading down to the Campaspe River behind the Echuca Hotel. It was an old place but it was a couple of rooms so it was good. George was about 14 months old by then.



**Brenda and me at Gloucester House, Echuca.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

Eventually we had a visit from Mr J.H. Davey, Housing Rep from the Aborigines Welfare Board, who talked to us about the condition of our home and the opportunities for getting a home in better condition. Mr Davey put the following notes in his report to the Aboriginal Welfare Board:

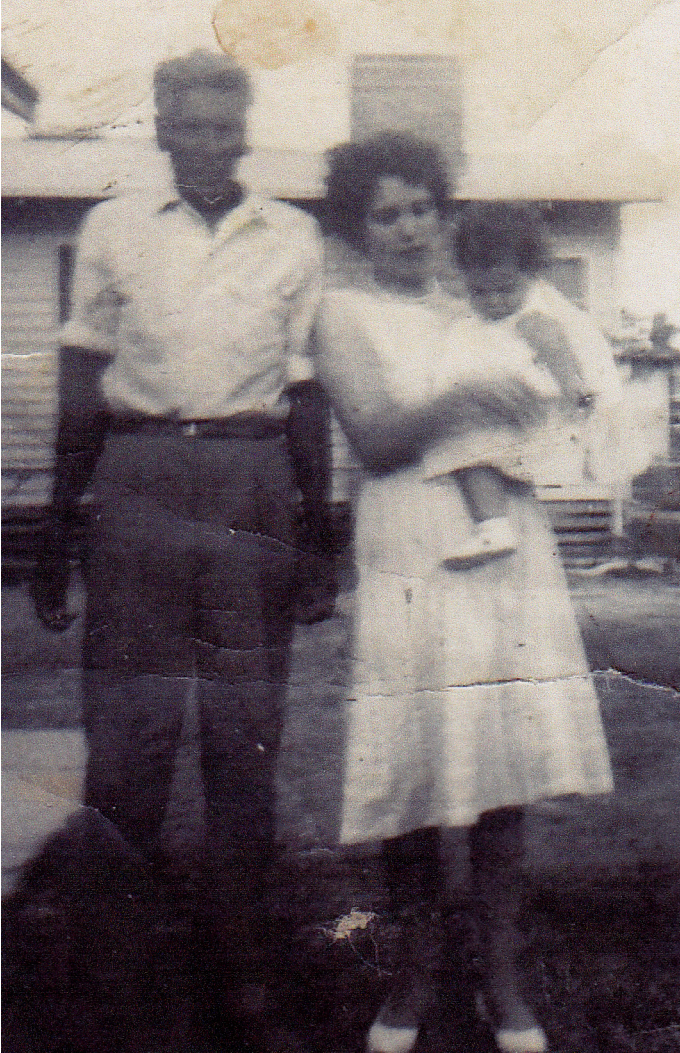
Nelson and his wife are an excellent young couple, well respected in Echuca. He is permanently employed at the local flour mill ... Nelson is extremely anxious to improve their conditions. He would like to have his own home. He is an outstanding athlete and already he has won a couple of foot racing gifts, with prize money up to £200 (\$400). He told me he has banked this and is building up a deposit on the purchase of a house. He himself looked spotlessly clean dressed in pressed slacks and white shirt. I was most impressed with this couple and would like to see them allocated to a housing commission home so that they could take advantage of the terms offered by the commission for home purchase. I think this couple is the most outstanding Aboriginal family I have seen anywhere. I would like to be able to attend to Nelson's case personally and would do so if we were not so many miles apart, but was wondering if you would be kind enough to take him in hand from this stage.<sup>1</sup>

We were quickly placed in a home at Freeman Street, Echuca, where we lived for seven or eight years until we were able to buy our own home.

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1 Files of J.H. Davey, Housing Member of the Aboriginal Welfare Board, 10 December 1957.





**My father with Brenda and our daughter Robynne at our home in Freeman Street, Echuca.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

## Buying our Home

In 1965 Brenda and I started making inquiries about houses to buy in an area just out of Echuca called Echuca Village. We had both been working, me at the flour mill and Brenda cleaning a school in Echuca; I had also had some wins and placings in professional running from which we were able to save to buy a home. But I will tell you about my professional running later.

We now had three kids and one on the way, so we wanted to get our family out of town and Echuca Village was a farming area, the perfect spot for raising our family. I had started my professional running career in 1954 and was also training a young bloke named Ken Buegge. His parents Ralph and Alma Buegge heard we were looking to buy a place and paid a visit to us one evening inviting us to look at a house that was up for sale at Echuca Village.

The house we looked at was an old weatherboard house that stood on about half an acre of land and was estimated to be about 60 years old. Unfortunately the owner wanted more money than we had, but then Ralph offered to lend us the difference of £800 (\$1600) so that we could pay cash on the spot for the house, so we did. He said they were happy to do this because of how I had helped Ken with his athletics. This was very generous of Ralph and Alma and we became firm friends for the rest of their lives.

We moved in soon after and Brenda and I started to make our little home. In fact this was our home for the next 44 years, bar a few temporary moves elsewhere for work. It was a beautiful little property just on the edge of the bushland and very close to the Murray River. There was a magnificent willow tree out the front with an irrigation channel flowing under and past and a thunderous waterfall not 20 metres from our front door. Our furniture was bought on time payment (layby) from Paterson's furniture store in Echuca at a few shillings a week and this left very little for food, clothes, or anything else. Our main entertainment was a Saturday night out at the pictures and fish and chips on Friday night. In between we listened to the radio. It is in this home that we raised our four kids, George, Brian, Robynne and Shoanna and took in a couple of nieces and nephews here and there too, when needed.

We loved sitting out under that willow tree, listening to the breeze through the leaves and the pounding of the waterfall while our kids swam in the channel throughout the summer. At times we even had to have our bath in the channel, because we didn't have running water or a shower for some time, until we could afford to put them in.



**My sons George, Brian, then Brenda, her niece Daisy, in front: my daughters Robynne and Shoanna, then Daisy's son Tony.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

We were working hard to get hot water and sewerage installed at our home. In the meantime, Brenda would be carting bucketloads of water from the channel to the old copper out the back to boil water and do the laundry by hand. When we finally got a bath she would do the same, every Sunday night, for the kids to have their baths in preparation for school the next day; while I would be out working on the house, and continuing with the running, as a way of trying to bring in some good money for us to do some home improvements like hot and running water. We did eventually get hot water on, as soon as money permitted, and this saved a lot of hard work for my darling Brenda.

While I was doing shift work and concentrating on my athletics training, Brenda would cook beautiful meals and see that the kids got off to school every day. She also took on a domestic cleaning job at the Echuca Central Primary School. I am very thankful for the way that Brenda always supported my running career by keeping the home fires burning. It would have been impossible to achieve what I had in running, without that kind of support from my wife. And I will forever appreciate her for this.

After 15 years doing shift work at the flour mill, I took on a number of different jobs to make ends meet in Shepparton, Ardmona, Balranald then back to Echuca. While I was working in Shepparton, Brenda got work at Goulburn Valley Base Hospital as a domestic and spent some time at Pullar's orchard as a sorter and packer.



**Our kids swimming in the channel out front of our home at Echuca Village.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

## Family Gatherings

Over the years that followed, my brothers, sister and our families would get together whenever we could for Christmas to keep our family close. This would always be a great family gathering with lots of fun, laughter and love amongst us all. Brenda and I loved to visit and spend time with our families especially her parents, my father, Nanny Pris and Pop, and our Aunties and Uncles. They were great days back then.

## Losing Pop

It's during this time, around 1966, that I was told by Nanny Pris that Pop Mackray had passed away 'a while ago' in South Australia where he had been shearing and had become ill from cancer. He was cremated at his home town of Wellington. I couldn't believe it. I was absolutely devastated that I had only just heard this terrible news. Pop was a second father to me and now he was gone.



## My Father-in-Law

### The Quiet Achiever

Before I go any further I want to tell you a bit about my father-in-law Ron Morgan. Ron was the son of Bagot Morgan and Lizzie Walker. As a child he was very close to his parents and siblings.



**Bagot Morgan's wife Lizzie Walker with their children Lydia, Leah, Ernest, Abel, Lizzie or Bertha, and baby Ron seated on his mother's lap.**

Source: Courtesy Ronald Morgan. High Resolution copy provided by AIATSIS and Jackomos Collection.

Ron eventually grew into a very intelligent man who spent much of his life worrying about the future of his people and Cummeragunga, the home he loved so much. He eventually married Ella Cooper and together they had ten children. In the 1940s Ron and his family lived down by the Barmah Bridge opposite the Barmah Pub, on the other side of the road from Cummeragunga. My wife Brenda loved to tell stories about her father who spent endless hours sitting at his kitchen table writing letter after letter to major newspapers in country Victoria. I can see little Brenda playing around at her Dad's feet, looking up to him in adoration and that candle flickering in her loving eyes. Brenda was especially close to her father and he was a kind, gentle giving soul just like his daughter.

## The Lobbyist

After he had acquired only a few years of schooling at Cummeragunga<sup>2</sup> under Nanny Pris, Ron Morgan started work as a stockman on Moira Station, at the age of eleven. We often hear about key people who were fighting for our rights back in those days, but rarely hear of people like Ron Morgan who quietly, in his kitchen at home, also took up that fight, and there are so many like him.

When he wasn't out working at Moira Station, or travelling around for work picking fruit in the Shepparton area, Ron spent his time writing to city and country based newspapers such as the *Sun*, *Age* and *Argus* and the *Riverine Herald* in Echuca. He was deeply concerned about the effect that colonisation was having on our culture and people and he like so many other men of his time had learnt about letter writing as an avenue for connecting with government in order to be heard.

Throughout his lifetime Ron persistently lobbied politicians and people of influence via his fluent handwriting seeking their support for a better deal for our people. He took up his pen whenever the opportunity arose, or the situation demanded he do so. He was forever promoting the Aboriginal cause, or answering any adverse criticism that appeared in the newspapers. I share with you now part of one of Ron's many letters to the *Riverine Herald* on 3 February 1958:

It is the year 1958 and as I am about to write I remember it is Australia Day, another milestone in the history of a wonderful country, one that has adopted and befriended people of many lands. But how sad when we read on this very national day, of the neglect and horrifying state of the true Australian native – the Aborigines. Such disclosure may shock many, but to we Aborigines it is the continuation of one long nightmare.

Down through the years we have suffered one injustice after another from a variety of unscrupulous persons, even from those entrusted with our care and wellbeing. The injustices suffered directly or indirectly have obviously had much influence on the conditions of the Aborigines.

I believe that we Aborigines have reached the most critical time in our history – a time when to speak carelessly of our race could create wrong impressions which in turn could prove disastrous or even fatal.

My first impression is that even though we of today are of lighter colour and caste we are bereft of much of the language and fine arts of our Aboriginal Ancestors, as the result of our contact with civilization. Still

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2 Due to the NSW Department of Educations restrictions on education for Aboriginal children.



there are those who lived in a time when many of the old Aborigines still survived to show a more ancient mode of living. They could show customs and beliefs of a high order.

Until recent times I lived and worked along the lines of civilization as I was taught, but happenings of later years and the study of literature have caused me to stop and think. What are we really? While civilization has deprived us of the better qualities of our Ancestors, it has not taken us very far by way of recompense.

As one of our better known Aborigines said in Melbourne during the Jubilee celebrations, civilization has taken the Aborigine halfway and left him to sink.

Today assimilation into the white race is advocated as the remedy for what has been long termed, the Aboriginal problem.

Aborigines were undoubtedly a Blessed People. We have learnt that the best things in life are free. The Aborigines inherited a country rich in the provisions of life.

## Ron's Education

You will notice the beautiful way in which Ron could articulate his thoughts and feelings. You can sense the absolute despair he was feeling about the plight of his people. I can almost see him sitting in the evening at his kitchen table putting pen to paper. When I read his handwriting, it's hard to believe he only had a third grade education before being pushed out of school to work as a stockman on Moira Station.

Ron had told me many times that Nanny Pris was his school teacher with the guidance of Grampa and that their teaching was of the highest standard. But he then went on to attend night classes in the Scholars Hut, a special place where Grampa James continued to educate those who were now too old to attend daytime school classes. Grampa's female teaching assistants such as Miss Affleck also held classes in the women's Scholars Hut, for our Aboriginal women and girls so that they too had access to an education over and above the minimum standard (Cato 1976). It is in those classes that Grampa taught our men about letter writing as a skill to voice their concerns to various authorities, and so they did. You will even note Ron Morgan's use of terms like 'colour and caste' which are Indian terms learnt from Grampa.

Ron also spoke very highly of Grampa James and all that he had done for our people on Maloga and Cummeragunga Missions in so many other ways. Hearing

this from Ron gave me further impetus to continue on in my personal search for information about Grampa, his life here with our people and his life before Maloga.

Ron was so deeply respected by all who knew him that in 1952 after encouragement from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal friends such as Mr A.E. O'Connor of Swan Hill, he wrote and published the book *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunga and its Aboriginal People*. He described Grampa in his book noting that:

There was a school where the syllabus was good and children were educated under a very capable teacher, the late Mr Thos S James, an amiable coloured gentleman who devoted his life and knowledge to the Aborigines of Cummeragunga, for as well as being school teacher he acted as physician and did the dispensary work on the Station, a work that was highly appreciated by the Aborigines as well as the medical advisers of the place in Drs Smith and Stoney respectively. He came among the people at Maloga, then on to Cummeragunga where, after a long and valued career, he retired in the year 1921. (Morgan 1952)

This book is a beautiful read, with Ron having the amazing ability to write in such a way that the reader can see, feel, hear, smell and touch all that he is describing, as though you were there with him. I am proud to honour the memory of both Ron and Brenda, by putting some of his words into this story so that they may live on (see Appendix 1 for the full text).

## Caring for Ron

In his later years Ron started to get quite ill from an early form of Parkinsons Disease. So Brenda and I went over to Rumbalara where Aboriginal people from the Flat had now been housed. Brenda's sister Lydia was living there and we hoped that Ron could live there too. But Mr Howe, the Rumbalara caretaker, a type of mission manager of sorts, wouldn't allow it calling Ron an old drunk. Poor Ron had never been a drinker in his life (that I knew of). He was a beautiful man who had spent most of his life raising his children and fighting for our rights through the power of the pen. He is the last person anyone could ever call a drunk.

## The Bad Omen

So Brenda and I took her father Ron back home to live with us. Then one day Brenda and Ron were sitting out on the front porch when her sister Lydia walked in the front gate. Ron looked up at her then at Brenda and said 'See that, Brenda! That's it, we are all doomed! That's the end of us all!' Lydia was carrying a

black basket which had a superstitious meaning to Ron. After that day, Brenda's family members started to pass away, one after the other, including her father Ron, and mother Ella, most of her siblings, her niece May and nephew Ron Heland. This was a terrible time for the family. After three years most were gone. I remember we paid for all the family funerals as they came along, with six in a row at one stage. About a month after he came to stay with us, Brenda's father Ron passed away in Echuca Hospital and poor Brenda was devastated. She absolutely adored her dear old Dad and I know she never got over his loss in all her days.

## The Helping Hand

By the time that Brenda's father passed away, our savings had run dry, from all the funerals, and I was still on junior rates at the flour mill, so we just couldn't put money together this time for poor Ron's funeral. So Brenda and I had to go to Brenda's Uncle Mick Morgan Snr (Ron's brother) to ask if he could help us and he was fantastic. He went and got a loan from his shearing boss, and he paid for his brother's burial and never mentioned it again. I assume he paid it off himself but he never asked us for a penny and we never forgot what he did for us then. Mick was a great man just like his brother.

## Resilience

We often talk about the resilience of our people today, due to our long history of oppression and marginalisation on our own land, and the years of grief we have suffered. Brenda is the ultimate example of such amazing resilience. She suffered loss within her family that no one should ever experience in such a short time, losing so many family members at once. But you know, she never stopped loving, giving and smiling. She is an incredible woman, so patient, so protective. We could all learn a lot from her about love and compassion in this day and age.

## Regrets

For me, my deepest regret is that I did not realise what a host of wisdom and knowledge my father-in-law was until it was too late. I feel positively remiss at the fact that here was a man who lived in that era – had so much to tell and I missed him and he was right under my nose. I was so busy running and coaching athletes at the time and working shift work at the flour mill, that I missed out on real quality time with him.

## Dad and Me

### Looking Back

Thinking of Ron now takes me back to my Dad. As you know the relationship between Dad and I really suffered over the years and sadly it seemed that Dad and I could never recapture that bond we had when I was little. I guess in many ways I blamed Dad for the suffering Mum had in her life, along with us having lost her at such a young age, and Dad knew it. But over the years, as Keith and I became men and Dad remarried and mellowed a bit, our relationship became a different one, and we were able to make it work for us, man-to-man.

Whilst my brother Brien and sister Carmel weren't old enough to see the life Mum, Keith and I had with Dad, they were still left very vulnerable from the loss of our mother and the inability of Dad to care for his family.

Dad married Alma Nicholls in 1955 and Keith and I were even his groomsmen which was a great bonding experience for the three of us. Then over the years following Dad's remarriage, Carmel, Brien, Keith and I all continued to see as much of Dad as possible. Thanks to Alma, we were all able to enjoy a good relationship with Dad.



**Dad's wedding to Alma Nicholls.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

And for Brenda and me, he was always nearby us somewhere and coming to stay fairly often. With our first child George, Brenda and I would often go fishing with Dad, just as I had gone fishing with Dad some 15 or so years earlier.

When I look at this photo of Brenda, our son George and Dad fishing up the Murray River, I realise this could just as easily have been a photo of me with

my Mum and Dad fishing up the Murray with Dad crouched beside the horse and cart. Dad eventually came to live with us at our home at Echuca Village. So we built an extension on the house especially for him. Sadly he was ill with emphysema so his time with us was limited.



**Brenda, our son George and my Dad. We are fishing with Dad on the Murray River.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

## Understanding Dad

And now, as I write this book and take the time to remember, there's a bit of healing finally going on. I am able to stop and think about Dad and his life challenges. I can see more clearly the hardships Dad himself had faced that inadvertently impacted on his life, his wife and his family. And there are some parallels between Dad's life and mine.

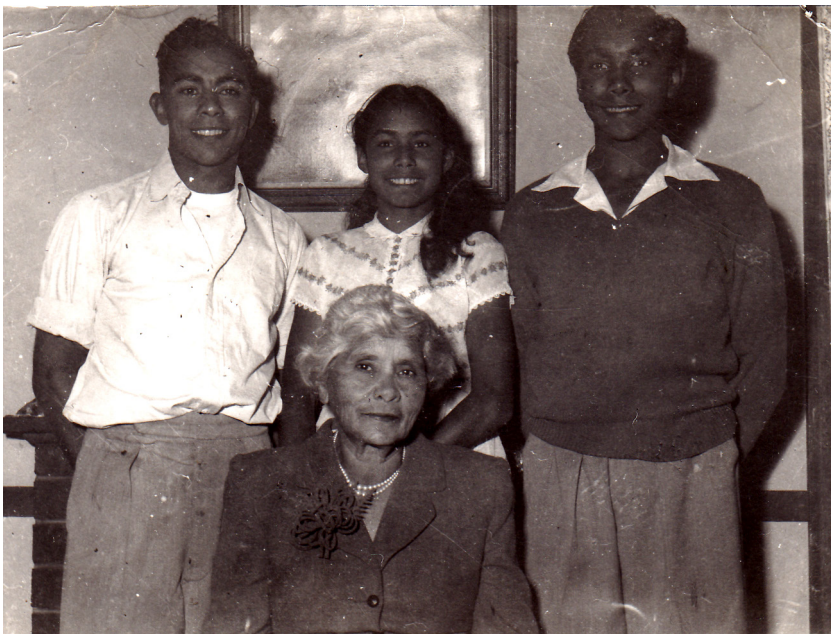
He lost his father when he was 12 years old, just as I had lost my Mum when I turned 13. He had to grow up quickly and become a father figure for his brothers and sisters, just as I did. He married and started a life with his new wife, our Mum, full of hopes and dreams just as I did with Brenda. Although he was of light build, his work was very hard and exhausting, just as mine was.



In hindsight I think Dad may have seen heading off to war as a big adventure: a chance to be independent away from the constraints of family; going off to war with his Uncle Bob and brother Keith to fight for a good cause; get away from the demands of that heavy working life he had; an escape from the struggles of life; and maybe even create a better life for him and his family when he returned home. To then be dragged off the ship in Darwin by his mother and return home because his wife had become so seriously ill with cancer, must have been a huge 'kick in the guts' for him on so many levels. Maybe he even felt a bit 'shame' for getting removed from the ship, because of his mother.

He was brought home to care for his wife, his young family and head out doing that same old heavy work that he hated, all the while becoming more and more frustrated and resentful. Then he started to crumble. Dad then had his oldest son taken away from him. Did he take this as a 'vote of no confidence' that he was a bad parent because Nanny Pris stepped in and took me away? Then he lost his wife and was left as a single father of four young kids. That must have been the final straw.

Yes, maybe today I can understand a little of why my Dad went from being such a big part of my life, to a father that seemed lost to me in so many ways from when I was seven. As I sit here writing this now, I can see that my Dad carried a very heavy load.



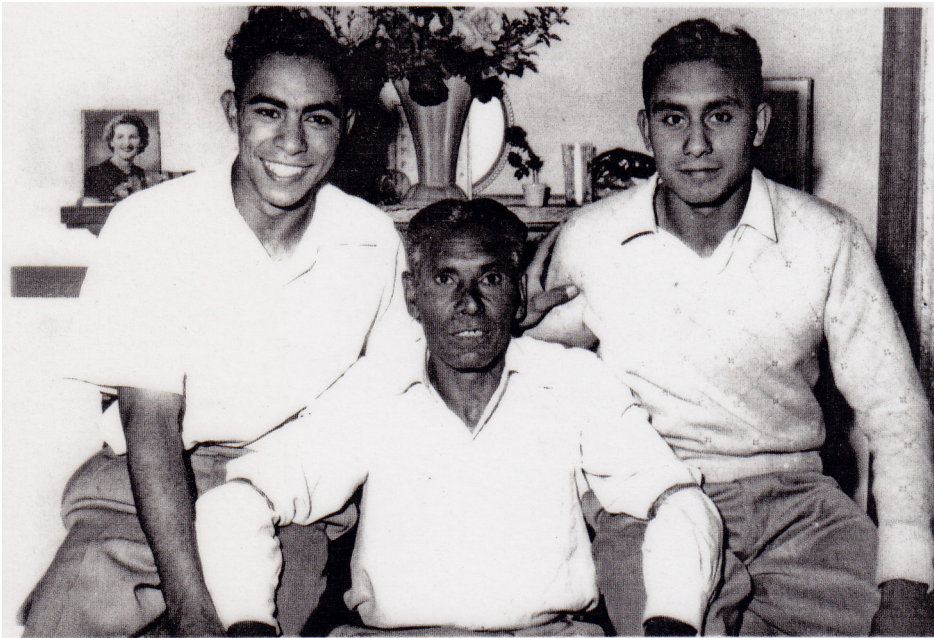
**My siblings Keith, Carmel and Brien with Nanny Pris.**

Source: GBRN Collection.



## Giving Thanks

It is from my life with Mum and Dad in my early years that I have the knowledge I have today to be able to pass on to my children, grandchildren and others through this book. For all of that I am eternally grateful. It's due to moving around for Dad's work that I heard the stories of all those athletes that came out of Cummeragunga. It was those stories that enabled me to dream and believe that I too could one day follow in their footsteps and become an athlete too.



**My brother Keith and me with Dad.**

Source: GBRN Collection.

Thirty years later, when Dad became ill with emphysema, he came home to Brenda and me to spend the final days of his life. He passed away on 1 June 1972. I have always believed that the many years of working on charcoal burning had led eventually to him ending up with emphysema. Thank goodness that we finally managed to make our peace two weeks before my father passed away because it needed to happen and it meant the world to both of us. My brother Keith passed away from cancer 13 years after Dad in 1985 at the age of 50. And now today, as I sit here and write this story, my dear younger brother Brien and baby sister Carmel are living in a nursing home with dementia. It is very difficult to see them as they are today having been such strong, vibrant children and adults, full of great hopes and dreams for their futures, living such rich and meaningful lives. To now suffer such a debilitating disease at their young ages. It's just not right! It is heartbreaking.