

# Norma Brien

My father was Albert Eric Armstrong, but he was known as Eric. And my mother was Kathleen Miriam, and she was a Fox before she married.

My father owned the property Waldera, which is out at Edith. They used to grow potatoes and keep livestock. My Mum had so many children that her hands were full just caring for a large family and she didn't work outside of our family home. Before having children, she worked at a property nearby, housekeeping and things like that.



I am one of eleven children: Lance, Keith, Neville, Valerie, Ian, Kathleen, Wilma, Beryl, myself, and John. We lost a brother, Wallace, who came after Neville. I was born in 1939 at my grandmother's, Nurse Fox's, home, which she had converted into a maternity hospital. I am so pleased that her home still stands and has been renovated and maintained by the current owners, Sharon and John Whittaker.

Growing up, my sister Beryl, who was two and a half years older than me, and I had to milk two cows each before heading down to the house where Mum always had breakfast ready for us. Everyone had their chores to do.

All my siblings and I would then walk two miles across the paddocks to Edith school, negotiating a log across the river to the other side. In the afternoon we would walk the same two miles back, which is why I've got strong muscles. Then we would get the cattle in, taking the calves off them to make sure they had enough milk for the milking the next morning.

We all went to primary school at Edith. It was a small one teacher school, which only had about 12 students at any given time. We could only go up to 6<sup>th</sup> grade and then had the choice of correspondence or go away to school. I think the older ones had a bit of correspondence. We all went to primary school in Edith, and I remember that Beryl and I went to the high school in Oberon. The boys then worked on the property, but the girls went away for further education. I enjoyed my friends at school. We didn't muck around.

When my older brothers and sisters got married, they would live with us. We had the bridal room for that.

We used to have to help with cattle and the sheep on the farm. We had a slide behind, I guess a tractor, and we used to pick up the dead sheep and pluck the dead wool off them to be sold. There were a good few dying at the time.

While the boys worked on the property, the girls would have to help them muster and then we would have our jobs inside. I can remember getting down and scrubbing the wooden floor in the kitchen and that type of thing.

After leaving school, I completed a secretarial course at the TAFE in Bathurst. I got a job with Donovan and Company in Oberon. They were stock and station agents. I worked there for approximately three years. After that I went into Bathurst and lived with my sister Beryl and worked for Rogers Meat Company for about three years, doing secretarial work. It was interesting work. Then I came back to Oberon and stayed with Auntie Jean McFawn, my mother's

sister, and worked at the Forestry. We connected to the Forestry at Blackheath. There I worked with Len Morse, who had a lot to do with the golf club, and Jack Carroll, who married a local girl, and Norm Tribe, who was stationed more at Blackheath. I worked there until I got married and then wasn't allowed to work for the Forestry anymore.

Social life? Oh, we used to go to dances at Edith and anywhere around like that. We used to go to the movies, play cricket and tennis. I started to play hockey when I was older, when my daughters were playing.

I married Frank Brien in 1959, and we had three children. Wal was born 12 months after we were married and then Nicola was born two years after Wal. My third child, Helen, was born seven years after Nicola.



L to R: Claude & Hazel (Bonnie) Brien, Frank & Norma Brien (nee Armstrong), Kathleen & Eric Armstrong

I worked on the property when the children were small. We had the dairy then but not for long. We ended up getting out of the dairy and into poddy calves from Camden. I had 96 that I was feeding. We had this trough with the hoses down in it and you would mix up the powder milk and feed six at a time. At the time Helen was only tiny in a stroller, and we had to keep her back from the trough as she would stick her fingers in to lick the milk! We then moved on to feedlotting cattle. Well, a big lot of years after that we started hay contracting around Oberon and Brewongle, eventually travelling out around Warren. We did hay contracting for the large stations of Haddon Rig and Butterbone. I remember one day drenching 800 sheep and then driving to Warren. I arrived at 10.30pm to Frank telling me I could have one and a half hours sleep before getting up to start work again!

I started working at Jenolan Caves when I was about 45 and stayed for 27 and a half years. First up I was just waitressing and then I was running the dining room. I worked with some good managers during that time. People came from Sydney and overseas because the caves were well known. What I consider important was if you had to reprimand someone, as a supervisor, remember the sandwich approach of "you praise, you reprimand and you praise again." You never leave them all alone, and if they were having trouble you would say, "You're having trouble, can I help you there?" You always remembered you were to be seen and not heard. I

met a lot of people and was thankful that I had a job. Working at Jenolan Caves was special to me as my family is related to James and Charles Whalan. The first recorded discovery of the caves was noted as James Whalan in the 1830's. Mind you, he was tracking the bushranger James McKeown, who used the caves as a hideout. Over the succeeding years James and Charles explored them and discovered several openings. Charles is attributed as the first to conduct tours for visitors to the caves in the 1840's.



**Norma's siblings with their spouses with their mother, Kathleen Armstrong, at Waldera**

L to R: Back row: John Armstrong, Ian Armstrong, Allison Armstrong, Lance Armstrong, John Fulton, Neville Armstrong

Middle row: Frank Brien, Dianne Armstrong, Bev Armstrong, Claude Ash, Wilma Ash, Kath Robinson, Ted Robinson, Keith Armstrong, Eve Armstrong

Front row: Norma Brien, Dorothy Armstrong, Valerie Jamieson, Kathleen Armstrong, Beryl Fulton

I believe respecting people is important. That's why I like the University of the Third Age, and I especially like our coffee club, held every Monday. There's not that many at coffee, but you realise if they're having problems or something, you're there for them.

My family were very sporty, and my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are like that. I'm proud of them. As a kid I loved to go to sports day. I used to perform very well at running, netball, things like that. Frank and his family were also good at sport. I like to think that's probably where my grandchildren take after me. However, the truth is they are surrounded by family on both sides who are sporty. Wal's boys, Bailey and Cooper, have represented in Cricket and Helen's boys have represented Australia in Rugby, Tom with the Wallabies and Lachlan with the Junior Wallabies. While they may inherit their sporting talents, it is their hard work and commitment to their sports of choice that I am most proud of. I am actually very proud of all my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They are all respectful and polite.

I like to keep busy and did stained glass and lead lighting, woodwork, spinning, crocheting, knitting and sewing. I even made the wedding frock for Diane Armstrong.

Some of the main changes in Oberon would be the building of the dam and the dam houses. I used to know lots of people in Oberon but that's all changed now. You can walk up the street and not know anyone!

My advice to my grandchildren and great-grandchildren is to be honest and realise you must work hard and care for people. I used to sit by dying people in Oberon. My Mum always said, "Norma, never leave a dying person."

I'm very proud of my children, especially to see what they've made of their lives. Wal is an engineer at Mars Petcare and Helen is a financial controller in the retail property sector. Nicola worked in the bank for almost 40 years and is now retired.

(December, 2024)