

Helen Toohill

I was born in Sydney in 1932, the eldest of six children - Noel, Lionel, Elwyn, Betty and Marjorie. After finishing Year 6 at Oberon I went to boarding school at Bowral Annesley Methodist Girls School. My brother Lionel went to All Saints in Bathurst but we were the only ones who went away.

When I went to boarding school I did enjoy it but I still missed home. I think that's something that's played back over the years, the fact that I wasn't home, especially when the other kids were growing up and the family business was growing. Dad was Ernest Cunynghame and he owned the butcher shop with his father - Cunynghame and Son. I was not there when the business became very successful and did not return until the present premises were established. We had to swap houses because my grandfather had a stroke and couldn't manage the stairs at the new shop. We originally lived in Dart Street.



When my grandfather died he left his share of the business to the other three boys - Colin, Harold and Reggie and it then became Cunynghame Brothers.

My mother was Kathleen Nightingale. Mum worked virtually all her life at the butcher shop. Eunice Bailey used to look after us. She'd come of an afternoon when we came home from school and cook tea and yes, she virtually looked after us.

Neither of my parents retired, they just didn't. They had a funny outlook to work. When I came back teaching and would go on holidays they were astounded...because they never ever had a holiday in their lives other than occasionally going to the horse races. Dad had racehorses and for a couple of days they'd go to the Melbourne Cup or something like that but it would only be down and back. There'd be no sightseeing.

The first shop was over near the Tourist Hotel because there was a row of shops where that garden is now. There was Arnold Harris, the barber, the butcher shop and Mrs Oran's tea rooms. The tea rooms were very popular. Then I think the butcher shop moved to the bottom end of town, near where the laundromat is now and later they moved up to where the butcher shop is today.

In primary school we were packed like sardines in really big classes. I think the teacher was Miss Cochrane and the Principal was Mr Robson. Each morning we used to sing God Save the King and recite the oath. We had to sit in a circle and show our handkerchiefs for the day...and I can remember Reggie Cunynghame. I always had to pass my handkerchief over to Reggie. He never ever had a handkerchief.

I don't know where the idea of becoming a teacher came from. I think actually we all put in for our scholarships, for anything and everything. I got a teacher's scholarship. I took up my scholarship –

two years at College and three years as a teacher before you qualified for a Teacher's Certificate. Ruth Lennon (Robinson) also had a scholarship so we roomed together at the GFS Hostel at Forest Lodge, across from Sydney University. Sydney Teachers College was part of the University of Sydney.

The hostel was close enough to the city to be able to walk into town and even across the Harbour Bridge at weekends. It was totally different from what you did at home.



The Cunynghame family: Back: L to R: Lionel, Betty, Elwyn, Noel
Front: L to R: Marjorie, Ernest, Kathleen, Helen

My first appointment after finishing college was Oberon. In those days you got sent where they wanted you to go, no "ifs and buts" or anything. I was happy enough with that, but I would probably have liked to have gone somewhere else. I had lots of prac teaching around Camperdown and Redfern and that area, and I couldn't get out of those areas quick enough. There was just so much trouble in the schools with kids who weren't really cared for at home.

I was the third teacher appointed to Oberon in 1951. I taught all areas - infants, primary and secondary. I can't remember clearly, but I know Ruth Lennon had the kindergarten and then I had the next lot. Mr Stanford had the senior classes. The class sizes were huge, 40 and 50 in a classroom. That was quite a challenge.

In my time I saw many changes. Student numbers increased rapidly because of the growth of the Timber Industry - the pine forests and the eventual factory as well as the seasonal workers for the pea picking season.



At first we didn't have that many rural kids because all the small schools were operating. Yes, and you know, there were a whole lot - Daisy Bank, Edith, Black Springs and Wiseman's Creek to name a few. Once these schools closed it took a while for the students to settle into the new school environment.

The school grew with many extensions and more staff. Clerical assistants were hired to help with the many extra tasks associated with a bigger school. The new high school was built but it was still a Central school. I had moved up through the ranks and was an Assistant Principal and, as such, was in charge of the old school. This was a time consuming and demanding role and my clerical assistant, Joan Sullivan, was an invaluable support at this time.

Supervising the other teachers was not easy. A lot of them were very set in their ways and used to bigger schools. And then, I suppose too, going up through the ranks of the school and staying there, it did make it a bit difficult for them to suddenly be working with someone and then the next thing finding out that they're your boss.

In particular three events highlighted my years as Assistant Principal.

1. Bathurst Teachers College was established - later Charles Sturt University. We became part of their program in having students do prac. teaching at our school. This involved supervising them in the classroom and liaising with their supervisors.

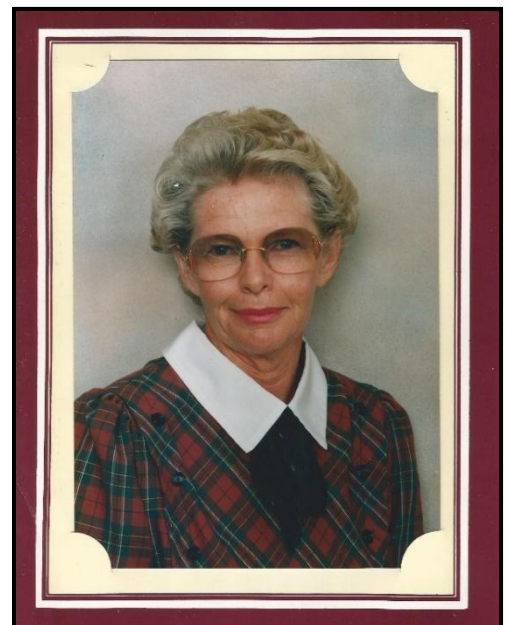
2. We changed our excursion policy to include overnight stays. The excursions to Canberra in particular were very popular. We had the assistance of parents to help with the trips away. This was very helpful.

3. We enlisted the services of the Royal Far West and Stewart House for the 'needy' children and the children who needed a holiday. They were able to get medical checkups as well as a holiday by the sea. Sometimes there was follow up treatment when they came home.



I married Dave Toohill in 1951 and we had three children, Warren, Gary and Karen. I took maternity leave with the children, and that was only three months in those days. We travelled a lot in the school holidays mainly in Victoria and Queensland. Once a year we went to the Gold Coast for our holiday. Keith and Joan Sullivan, and Joan's son and daughter in law, Tim and Kathy, accompanied us most years. We really enjoyed the change in climate.

I retired at 55 because that was the retirement age and the year after I retired Dave died. That was a difficult time because we'd bought a caravan and planned to travel all around Australia. We were going to do great strokes and everything fell through.



It was then I decided to take up golf. I'd never played any sport before because I never had time. Joan Sullivan and I got together and went to Bathurst and Ian Norrie gave us golf lessons. Ian talked us both into joining Bathurst Golf Club and we both joined Oberon Golf Club as well. I still play in Bathurst once a week.

When I first joined Oberon Golf Club it had just gone bankrupt and had moved from up the hill down to the Scout Hall. We spent every Friday afternoon for weeks selling raffle tickets to raise money for the Golf Club. There was a really good band of women who worked like trojans catering and doing everything they could to raise money. That seemed to be our life. We even raised money for the new kitchen. Some of those women still play today.

I went right through the ranks in Oberon starting out as Treasurer, then Secretary and finally President of the Women's Golf Club. While I was there we had the very first Blue Mountains tournament. Prior to that the committee wouldn't give Oberon the tournament because we were too isolated. Anyway, we fought and fought and got it. After that we had our turn.

I worked as the Rep for the Blue Mountains Women's Golf for quite a number of years and then I became Handicap Manager for Blue Mountains and then President of Blue Mountains for four years. Now I'm what is called a Counsellor which is probably the next step down from a life member. I still go to all the meetings and I'm still on the Blue Mountains committee. Yes, I was very proud of that really. Golf was a big part of my life.

I travelled a lot - went to the British Isles and Europe. I loved Ireland. Then I did a number of cruises to New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. I also toured Tasmania three times, went to the Top End as well as trips to Western Australia and the Barossa Valley.

I go to Bathurst to play golf every Tuesday, which I'm enjoying, even with the technology that's going on with it. I also do craft for the Bathurst Hospital Kiosk. I do tea towels and different odds and ends like that and donate them. I've been on the catering committee at the Oberon Uniting Church for a long time too. That involved catering for luncheons, funerals and that sort of thing

The biggest changes in the community I think is the fact that we've only got one hotel at the moment. The Tourist used to be the centre of attention. Everyone went to the Tourist and I must say, as kids, we liked looking out the side window of the butcher shop at all the brawls and fights on a Friday night when 6 o'clock closing was in.

I've just really done what I've wanted to do and I've had the support of Gary and Karen in particular because Warren made his life with the National Bank.

My thing is to keep going. I'm not interested in age. I just do what I want to do if I can do it. And that's just it. I think if you're going to sort of admit that you're getting old and sit back and do nothing, then that's it.

It's not only my family that has been my mainstay. I also have excellent friends.

I used to be a reasonable golfer, I'm not good now but I enjoy it and as someone said last week, I hit straight up the middle and that says I don't get into any trouble. So I still enjoy it and I don't know for how long I'll keep driving myself to Bathurst every Tuesday.

The worst time of my life was when Mum died in 1988, Dad died in 1990 and then Dave died in 1992. Mum was 82 and Dad was 79 when they died. Dave was only 65. Yes, and that's where I decided to wake up to myself and get going and just make something of the rest of my life. Gary and Denise have been my mainstay and have always been there for me.

I guess I'm proudest of my community service role in the Oberon community over the past years. Firstly in my capacity as a teacher and then my contributions with the Golf Club and the Uniting Church. I'm also proud of when I was on the Blue Mountains Committee.

(October, 2024)