

Nancy Dennis

I was born in Nurse Fox's Hospital in 1936 and baptised at Edith in that little old stone house where Maurice Brady now lives.

My dad was John Henry Dwyer and my mother was Madalyn Victoria Whalan.

I grew up in paradise; I just had good parents and a loving family. My brother Mervyn was six years older than me. He was the organizer of us, he was so clever. Then there was Joy, the silent achiever, and I'm 18 months younger than Joy but I'm the wild child of the family. Leon came nine years later. We all played outside. Mervyn and I went rabbiting and did everything possible on the farm.



I was always a show pony and every night I used to do a concert on the lounge, doing ballet and singing. One night I got into trouble, which was normal, and when Dad asked me if I was going to sing I said, "Nah, I'm cranky." Dad grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and put me outside in the dark until I banged on the door and said, "I'll sing, I'll sing." Dad took me inside and said, "God gave you a gift and if ever you're asked to do something, you do it." That's a lesson I've lived by all my life. There's very few times you will ever hear of me saying "no." Some things that happen in childhood are very, very important lessons.

We didn't have a fridge and when Dad killed a cow we used to have to corn all our meat. We made our own butter and Mum had to do the washing by hand out the back. When I saw Dad shoot the cow, that was the end of my eating meat till this day.

I went to what I call the Edith Advanced College of Education because that makes me sound important, but it wasn't, it was only a public school. We had the best teacher, Mr Dempsey. He taught from year one to year six and I only got put in the corner once for pulling the legs off a grass hopper! I went to 6th class there and then Mr Dempsey left. We got a new teacher. Mum and Dad got word that I wasn't learning much because I was teaching the other kids, so they sent me to Lithgow to learn. I didn't fit in very well, but one day they had a school concert and I played the mouth organ and from then on I was a hero and I've been a hero ever since. That was the start of my musical career.

Can you believe – to go to school in Lithgow, Mum and Dad put me on the train to go to Tarana – then I had to wait 40 minutes to catch the Western Mail to Lithgow. I was so scared – I was only 12 years old.

I only stayed at Lithgow for nine months, and then I came back to Oberon for the last two years. I lived at the convent with the nuns for one year. I was supposed to learn music but after two lessons the nun came out to my place and heard me play all my music. She said, "You will never learn to read music," so she taught me the chords. So that's what I do – I play by ear. Then my mate down the road bought a button accordion and I played it as good as I'm playing now. Dad bought a piano for me when I was about 12 and I used to play with Dad and sometimes I'd play with him at the dances.

Dad would take us to dances when we were kids, and then when we were teenagers we would maybe have done a dance at Edith on Friday night, a dance at Black Springs Saturday night and then we'd have the hide to go to Burraga Sunday night, which would get us really unpopular with Mum. It was like we were hyped up on drugs because if we got a bit tired we'd take a couple of dessertspoons of sugar in our tea and that would keep us going till supper time. Then we'd get another couple of hits of sugar to get us home. Nobody got killed, nobody got hurt. Talk about the kids on drugs - we were hyped up on sugar. I was, anyhow.

After school I just worked at home, helped Dad and worked on the farm. I married Geoff Dennis in 1957 and moved to Ellimatta, Shooters Hill. He was a good husband but in those days the dads didn't have a lot to do with the children. He was a good provider and I stayed home and reared the children.



I can still remember the day they landed on the moon. We had just bought the television, it was very crackly but we got to see it.

I had many opportunities to play in bands. I can play good dance music but my mission was to care for my children. I had six children in ten years - Bernie, Colleen, Noeleen, Garry, Dianne and Beverley. I've got beautiful children.

As the family grew older and were going to St Josephs in Oberon, they had already developed a love of music. Bernie, Graham Toole and Chris Callaghan would all gather in my kitchen at Shooters Hill and that's where they started doing their music. Then we started playing at the school dances down at the Methodist Hall. I'd also go into St Catherine's and take the kids and they'd play for the people in there.

The whole lot of my family can play music and they all come home at Christmas time, even now. Christmas Mass is like a corroboree. I play the organ and last year I think I had nine fellas all playing guitar and singing. Mickey and Clancy Pye, and Noeleen my daughter, who is the backbone of our music, have been coming to Mass with me since they were little. Two years ago they all came on Mothers' Day and all my children brought their guitars and played at Mass with me. I got an award for playing music for the church for 48 years. My dad only heard me playing once at Mass, and he died before he could hear me the next Sunday.

So, we live for music. There wouldn't be one day of my life that I'd go past that piano and don't play a tune.

In 1979 I moved to Kickatinalong at Norway. I started working at Timber Industries that same year and I stayed there for 20 years. Factory work is hard but you make so many friends. There was never one day that I walked away from work that I didn't have something to laugh about.

I did ten years on the Green Chain. The timber was sawn up and the various sizes came down a slope on a pair of chains in this great waterfall. All the different sizes just slid down. The men up the top took out the 8 by 2s (200x50mm) and 8 by 1s (200x25mm) and as they came down the timber got smaller. When I started I was taking out the 4 by 2s (100x50mm) and the 3 by 1s (75x25mm). It was reasonably dangerous work.

After ten years they built a stacker and I moved up there. It was quite dangerous and fast. As the boards were coming along I had to cut them off with the trim saw. There was no guard on the trim saw and it was only in the last couple of years that they put a guard on. Things you did were dangerous but we didn't have that many accidents. I think we were all careful.

It was hard working in the factory, but it got me to where I am now. I finished working there in 2000, when I was made redundant. I wrote a poem "Ten years at Timber Industries" about this period. This poem went all over Australia in the Timber Industry Journal.

I was five days unemployed when Brenda Lyon saw me in Mawhoods and asked me would I go and work for her. So that solved that problem. I worked in the garden and I worked for Brenda for many years and then when Lynn Boswell took over Falkirk, I worked for her for quite a while too.



A clean-up at the convent in 2021

After I left work I was on the road – every bus that left Oberon I was on. I have seen most of Australia on Ross Corby's bus. Thanks Ross and Gwen!



I play music at the hospital in Oberon on Thursdays, and I go to Columbia every second Tuesday. I was going to St Catherine's in Bathurst for probably 20 years, and I also used to play for the people at Macquarie Care. But I haven't been going since Covid. Playing the button accordion is good, but it's hard work, or I drag the keyboard in as well. That's worth a million dollars because you can't entertain people at the piano. You have to have eye contact with everybody. You can't just entertain with your back to them.

And there's give back, of course. At the end of the day, I'm not much good at washing up in other people's places and I have a cop out. If I can manage to be able to find a piano or something I'll play music rather than washing up. I don't trust myself with other people's crockery.

My passions are music, dancing and rearing the kids. I've been doing line dancing since I was going to work – probably 20 to 30 years. I used to take the kids to the dances all the time. I've been a member of the Bathurst Country Music Club for 25 years and go every month to sing and play the accordion or keyboard.

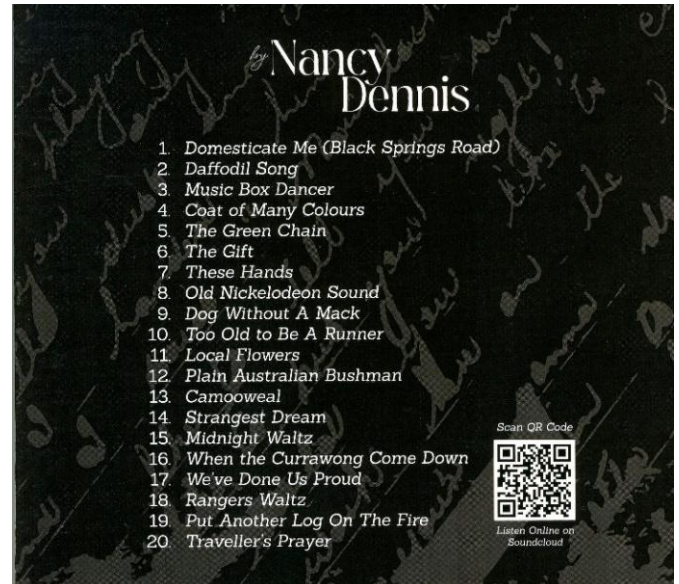
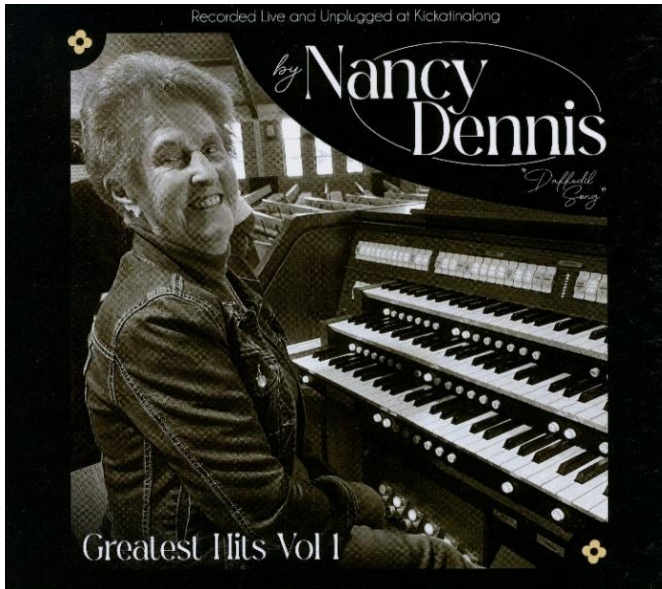


2010 Citizen of the Year – Nancy with her children and three of her twenty grandchildren.
Back row: Colleen (Clark), Bev (Whittles) Dianne Dennis, Garry Dennis, Noeleen (Pye) & Bernie Dennis.

Front row: Kane Dennis, Nancy, James & Claire Whittles

My proudest memories are the day I got Citizen of the Year and also when I sang Slim Dusty's "We've Done Us Proud" in Oberon with my family. I have written quite a few poems about my life. My granddaughter Amanda Clark has put them into a "A Book of Poems by Nancy Dennis."

I wrote The Daffodil Song in 1991. I am proud of that. I have shortened it a little. Mickey Pye recorded it at Pye's Place and he put the backing in with me on keyboard. Jack Whittles, my grandson, recorded my CD at my place at Kickatinalong in 2023, when I was 87, and he has included The Daffodil Song. Four songs on the CD are my own work, nos. 1, 2, 5 and 10.



Scan barcode to listen to Nancy's songs

I've got a photo of me standing on my head when I was 70 – Mickey Pye put that picture of me in the paper! I could still do it at 80 – I can still stand on my head now!

I was brought up Catholic but have great respect for all religions.

My advice to my grandchildren and great grandchildren? Are we going to sit it out or are we going to dance? Don't sit around whingeing – just dance. Dance like nobody's lookin' at ya!

But I think I believe in God, doesn't matter how hard it is, God will sort it out. Hopefully he will, anyhow. Now nobody else can sort it out, so God might as well. God will sort it out.

(November, 2024)

Ten Years at Timber Industries (by Nancy Dennis, 1990)

I came here ten long years ago,
My future to expand.
And I asked the T.I. Manager
"Do you need a helping hand?"

George Day looked me up and down
And shuffled round the floor.
"You're just not big enough" he said
Then shuffled round some more.

"The work is very heavy here,
You'd never stand the strain.
Go home and wash your dishes,
And don't come back here again."

Cooby heard about my plight
“George this one might surprise,
I’ve seen her ring the pea paddock,
Against people twice her size.”

I started on the Green Chain,
Stacking the four by ones,
And for the first few days,
I asked myself, “Good Lord what have you done?”
But soon I got used to stacking boards,
And carrying the stickers in,
Pushing out the trolleys,
Then bringing them back again.

We battled all the elements,
The snow, the wind, the rain,
But all the boards the mill could cut,
Were stacked on the old “Green Chain”

I’ve played my share of jokes, it’s true,
But all in fun for sure.
Like the day I threw the sticker
And it went through the dunny door.
With gloves in hand I confessed my sin,
I was scared – could hardly speak.
“Don’t worry Nancy,” Cooby said
“She’s going down next week.
To our old time way of doing things
You dealt the final blow,
To make way for the stacker
The dunny has to go.”

An automatic stacker,
We’d be in paradise,
We’d sit there pushing buttons,
We’ll maybe get up once or twice.
But boards are much like cattle,
You’d never know what they will do,
It’s always the one that heads the mob,
That just will not go through.

I’ve been granted life-time membership
In the T.I. book of crimes,
This is “Sluggo’s Holy Bible”
Which records our working times.

I know I’m not your number one,
Maybe twenty two or more,
But I’m mostly here, and on the job,
That should even up the score.

Thanks to all men in charge,
Who haven't made my life a hassle,
Or was I lucky and out of site,
When this place showed signs of battle.

Thanks to all my workmates,
In my book, number one,
Despite what they say, we do work hard,
At getting the job done.

To George – a word of warning,
If you're choosing a man for the job,
“Never judge the size of the dog in the fight
Judge the size of the fight in the dog.”

Well I guess I better go now,
I'm running out of rhyme,
Or I'll be recorded once again
In “Sluggo's Book of Crime.”
