

# Kerry Gibbons

My parents did it tough. I was one of 11 children and we had little, yet I consider we had everything.

Dad was Morton Gibbons and Mum Betty Hotham. Both families were fifth generation Australians, with John Gibbons settling in the Isabella area in 1838.

I was born at the Oberon hospital on the 30th of May 1948. Mum and Dad lived with Dad's parents in a small old house called Melrose at Isabella, where he was born. He worked the farm and did casual work for Tom Lawson at Bradley's Flats. Melrose was flanked by the Isabella River on the western side and had rich soil on the flats, ideal for growing many types of vegetables.



My grandfather, Jack, and grandma, Sarah, were getting along in years, and as we were living in the same house, I remember listening to stories of Chinese goldmining on the Isabella River in the 1870s. There were up to 600 prospectors working the river on our property. They were camped on Tobacco Flat, now known as the Ah-Longs Flats. They grew veggies, had fruit trees and grew tobacco plants.

They ran water troughs from the spring-fed creek from below our house to the rich gold seam above the Isabella River. This man-made water race, constructed in the 1870s, was one mile long and is still visible today. Another remarkable feat was where the Chinese changed the course of the Isabella River by cutting a channel through a rocky outcrop, so as to fossick for gold along the dry riverbed. It was roughly thirty yards long, six yards deep and five yards wide (30mx6mx5m). An incredible feat.

In the late 1930s until 1958, distilling eucalyptus oil was a great source of income in the Isabella area, with peppermint trees growing on most properties. Our property had a eucalyptus plant and I can remember being involved in producing the highly sought after oil. Sharp leaf-cutting knives were used to strip leaf from the branches of the trees, which then were heaped up and loaded onto a trailer with a pitchfork, to be taken by the tractor to the distillery. A large steel distillery tank was filled with the leaves. When full, a large lid was craned onto the top and clamped tight with wedges. Eddie, my older brother, and myself then had to push the wheelbarrow to the clay pit, and return with wet clay to seal the lid of the tank, to remove any chance of steam escaping. The site for our eucalyptus plant was located just below a continuous spring, so that water for the boiler and the condenser could be gravity fed. The boiler tank was above ground so a fire could be lit underneath to produce steam. Steam was forced through steel piping to the bottom of the large distillery tank with the leaves in it. The steam would vaporise the oil in the leaves, then leave the tank via a pipe which, when cooled, condensed the gas into a liquid before being collected in a forty-four gallon drum. Once in a container, the oil and water separated allowing the water to be drained off. The end product at market could fetch four pounds a gallon (about \$2/litre) in the 1950s, when sold to either Donovans or Basel Probert. Just about every property in the Isabella area had a eucalyptus plant.

At Isabella in the 1950s it was very hard to make a living, but there were rabbits everywhere, which provided many meals for us. We had no electricity, no running water, and unreliable old vehicles. There was Dynamite, the reliable chestnut, who was called on to get to the Isabella post office to collect mail and supplies.

Mum and Dad decided on boarding Eddie and myself at Glenroy, Black Springs with Grandma Hotham so we could attend Daisy Bank School with Alan Hotham, who was 12 years old. That's where we did our first year. Then in 1955 we returned home to enrol at Swatchfield School for two years.

More kids kept on coming along (Mum had 11 children) and when the Lands Department opened blocks at Black Springs in 1956, Dad built the house and we moved in 1957. We walked to Daisy Bank School for two years with the other kids from the village because the school at Black Springs wasn't completed until 1959. Dad joined the Forestry Commission when it started a workforce in Black Springs.

Pea picking was an important part of my life in the latter days of schooling. Coming from a large family, work started at a very young age and the local lads, including myself, spent many a long hot summer's day picking peas. The money was good and compensated for the back pain and the sore knees. And after picking all day, we would then help load the truck for the Sydney markets.

In 1962 the school bus took us to St Joseph's High School in Oberon, and in 1963 in Year 9, I completed the Intermediate Certificate and finished my schooling. That was the last year you could do it before the introduction of the Year 10 School Certificate.

In 1964 I began work with the Forestry Commission at the ripe old age of 15. The pay was seven pounds and 16 shillings weekly. On my first day I went control burning with Dad out at Banshee Road. For the next few months my task was collecting pine cones for seed, in compartments where Max Hanrahan and Keith Hotham were falling thinned pine trees for the mill. Their draft horse Cherry was kept busy snigging the logs from the forest to loading dumps. How things have changed!

At the end of the winter, a job came up with the cadastral surveyors Milton Merryful, Pappy Meirrh and a young Billy Klower from Burruga. I thought I had won the lottery. The job involved locating trig points on the nominated hills for mapping. Building the trig stations from rocks with poles in the centre, with metal masts attached, was my job. I still point out to my mates all the trig stations that I've built.



On the 30th of May, my 17th birthday, I was off to Clancy Motors to buy a new 1965 Ford Cortina. Eddie bought a Falcon on the same day. Since I turned 17 my pay rose to eight pounds sixteen per week.

Back at home Leo Grady offered me 20 pound a week as a farmhand. So I returned home, leaving mates and a job I really loved. I spent 18 months with Leo before I decided it was time to get back on the Forestry Commission.

The forestry was expanding rapidly and Black Springs was growing with more residential building lots being released. We had gymkhanas, dances, tennis and cricket teams. The new hall was just completed. John McKinnon, Peter Hanrahan, brother Eddie and myself started a dance band. We not only worked all week, but we were usually playing music for a dance somewhere in the local area on weekends.

The Forestry was a big employer in the 1980s and 90s. At one stage there was Dad and seven of his children working on the Forestry. There were also seven Hotham brothers and numerous Hanrahans working on the Forestry, all from the Black Springs area.

The workforce had good relations with the foresters. We'd do anything for them because they had a good idea of how everything worked together. There was give and take everywhere. It was a Forestry family, and just a great time in my life.

The Black Springs Progress Association was formed in 1960 and has been the heart that made our community so special through the years. Bringing the wider community and families together, providing sporting facilities for the village, funding the local school, even purchasing a school bus for families around the area to take their children to the Black Springs school. I have been a member since 1965 and am now in my third term as President.

I was hooked on rugby league from the age of 10 years when the mighty Oberon Tigers made it to the grand final in 1958 against the Orange CYMS at Wade Park. I still watch the locals play to this day. 1959 was Tony Paskin's era and the premierships grew. We were privileged and spoiled in the 1960s, having an unbeatable team to follow through the winter months. I was involved in producing the DVD "10 Out of 12 Ain't Bad", the history of the Tigers.

My great love for tennis would always see me at the Oberon tennis courts every Sunday evening. And one day in the late 70s my eye caught a glimpse of a young lass. It seemed as if she wanted to chat. Her name was Robyn King. She was appointed in December 1978 as Director of the new pre-school in North Street at Oberon. We were married in October 1980 and built a house on the Rockley Road at Black Springs.



By the end of 1988, five beautiful children completed our family. We were involved in all community activities, supporting the school, the school sports, the Black Springs Progress Association. We now have 14 grandchildren to help us stay young. We moved the family to Oberon in the beginning of 2001 so that the children could get a higher education in Bathurst. We were sad to leave the school at Black Springs.

I had been offered a grader operator position on the Forestry in 1967 and had learned the basics of road shaping and drainage. This often involved interpreting road survey designs. Understanding road survey design completely revolutionised my thinking about road formation



and drainage. I developed a great love of new road construction. The pinnacle for me was the announcement of a major upgrade on the Shooters Hill Road, from Edith Road to Ivers Road. I will always be thankful to our forester, Col Roberts, in backing his forestry roading team to undertake this construction. He felt we had the ability to take on such a major project, when other options could have been sought. I was part of that team which spanned the summers of 1991 to 1994 when the project was completed.

The construction may have cost a large amount of money, but remains as the standard for road builders. It taught me that it is better to build a road correctly the first time. With the skill I learned on this project, Col Roberts and I developed and presented a Grader Operators course, which we ran for grader operators from all around NSW.

I took a redundancy from the Forestry in the year 2000, when the Forestry Office in Oberon closed down. I had purchased a grader in 1988, and had done contract work on the side. In 1994, Brian Saul, who was another Forestry worker on the graders, joined me in a business partnership. It was a great idea and we worked for a lot of people we knew, including for the Forestry. Later on, in 2007, Brian bought my share of the business. I said, "I'll work for you for a year." And 15 years later, I was still there. I retired two years ago in 2023. I was 75, so I had spent 60 years in my working life on the farm and forestry and in private business, and I loved what I did.

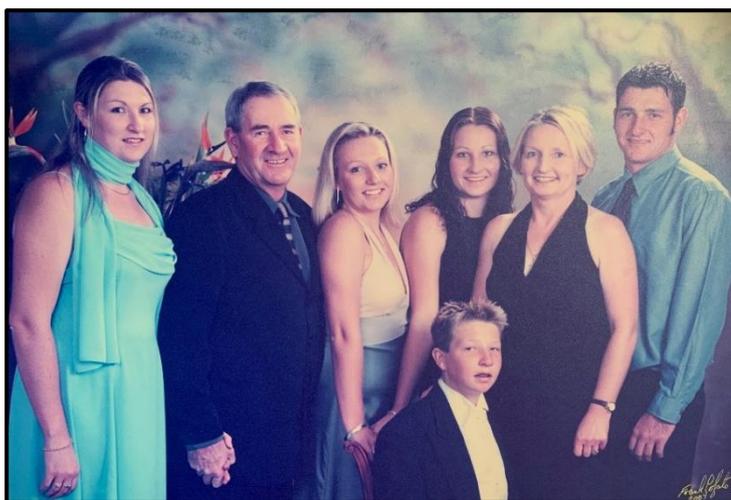


Kerry, Max Hanrahan, Kathy Sajowitz

I always had an interest in the historical cemetery at Black Spring and it was getting into disrepair. The land had been donated by Michael Hanrahan in 1868. I have many descendants on both sides of the family in this cemetery. We have to protect this sort of history. I have collected about 20 large display boards of photos and newspaper cuttings which can be put up in the Black Springs Recreation Hall when we have visits and history days.

I have always had a desire to have a crack at being a councillor. With a fair amount of criticism towards councils by many people, I felt the need to support the positive side of local government, to increase residential lots in town, and I was keen to improve the standards of road construction and maintenance through training and design work. Council was a steady learning curve, but after looking back on my years, I am thankful for the opportunity and the experience. In my time, we fought off amalgamation, and received many grants from three levels of government. We completed the Campbells River upgrade, the Abercrombie Hill, obtained grants for the Lowes Mount Road, completed the missing link on the Dog Rocks Road and sealed Arkstone Road. We also obtained approval for more subdivisions, an aged care facility, plans for a new library and new sports grounds.

I do many different things in the community and I thank Robyn for being so patient with me through life. She's a quiet achiever, level headed at all times, and a quiet, loving mum to all the children. She still works at the high school.



Laura, Kerry, Clare, Joy, Robyn, Micheal, Peter in front

My siblings and I are all best friends and we look after each other. Robyn and I have 14 grandchildren and a big house so we often get together. They're all happy, well-adjusted children.

Some people have a bolt of lightning and hallelujah and they're converted, but my journey was slow and steady and developed as I was nurtured through the example of Mum and Dad's loving

care. A belief in God demands accountability in all areas of life for me. My faith is my great treasure, giving me peace and purpose, a joy the world cannot provide. It is my faith that keeps me strong, positive and joyful. I believe in truth, honesty and compassion and my motto is if you see a need, do something about it.

If I had my life over, I would not change a thing.

(October 2025)

### **Our Legends**

Dimmed by time but memories clear of a brilliant team which had no peer.

Up on the mountains of the Great Divide, this legendary team swept all aside.

It was '58 and the brains of the day decided to try another way.

Smith, then Paskins, turned the tide and moulded the team into a wonderful side.

Rawlings, Harvey and Grady with pace to burn, Big Don, Col, Evans, and Rush, the hard yards to earn.

Normy and Jock, what are they up to now? Scheming again, they sure knew how.

There's nothing on, so you're led to believe, but Fawcett's away with a swerve and a weave.

With a turn of speed, he is down the blind, surprising the defence that he's left behind.

When the visitors tried to cross the line, they were stopped by Trudgett, Nicholl, Fisher and Brien.

Another defeat for the opponents that day, as Bull on the burst put them away.

Gary Harvey and Casey carving them up, and Billygoat Ryan running amok.

When Stomper brought his boys to town, it was Jo and Nookey who cut them down.

It's young blood we need to carry on; we've lost Laurie, Rolf, Foxy and Big Don.

There is Kelly running hard and straight, he tramples over them, and it's shut the gate.

Booth, Press and Hills all ready to go, the Ballingers, Trudgetts and Clinton on show.

Big Gibbs up the middle with Roberts in hand, the Tigers' nursery the best in the land.

Now Fryer is here to give us a boost, we are back on top, we rule the roost.

The Oberon of old was the cry of the call, and the team of '75 made it 11 in all.

A remarkable feat by this Tigers Town, who would never let their supporters down.

The Portland boys are lending a hand, and it all worked out so very well planned.

This Oberon team created great fame, never to be equalled, no never again.

Now history recalls this very day, when we say thanks in this special way.

A lap of honour, a plaque for a prize, we have all come back, a tear in our eyes.

A lifetime of memories, with so much joy, was given to me when I was a boy.

Kerry Gibbons