

Dennis O'Connell

I grew up in a world that feels almost unrecognisable compared to today. My childhood in Oberon NSW was shaped by wide paddocks, dirt roads and the steady rhythm of farm life, long before electricity, television, mobile phones and computers. Life was simpler and slower and deeply connected to the land.

My family's roots in the area run deep. My great grandfather, Thomas Henry O'Connell, was born in County Limerick and made the long journey to Australia in the 1880s, sponsored by Jeremiah Nunan. He settled in Duckmaloi and began growing potatoes as well as wheat.

His pioneering spirit became part of the family's identity. My grandfather, Jack O'Connell, was one of the first men in the district to buy a car. He went to Sydney with Alf Lean, the Dodge agent in Lithgow. They travelled by train to Sydney where Jack bought a Dodge Tora with canvas top. Alf taught Jack to drive while coming back from Sydney and Jack drove home from Lithgow to Duckmaloi on his own.

My father was John (Jack) William O'Connell, the second youngest of a family of nine. He grew up at Duckmaloi and then he joined the Air Force when he was 17. He was in Darwin during the bombing of Darwin. After the war he came back to Duckmaloi and began working with his older brother, Tom, driving trucks working on the Oberon dam.

Dad met my mother, Joyce Lawson, who was working at Peter's Cafe at the time, when he called in for a cup of tea on his way home after a night at the hotel. They met and the rest is history.

Mum and Dad married in 1946. At first, they shared a house with Mavis and Artie Butcher, living opposite Nurse Fox's. As a matter of fact, Mavis gave birth to the twins, Beverley and Brenda, about eight or ten days before I was born. Mum and Mavis were in the hospital straight across the road at the same time. Mum and Dad went on to have four children - me, Cheryle, Patricia and Noel.



Young Dennis

In 1947 Dad bought a new Bedford tipping truck and worked first on the Kanangra Walls Road and later on the Bells Line of Road. My parents lived in a caravan at the Workers' Depot at Bell and I was about two years old then. Many other families and single men were also camped there. After my sister Cheryle was born in Katoomba, Dad sold the truck and we moved back to my grandparents' home at Duckmaloi. Living in a caravan, which was little better than a single room, with two small children, was just too difficult.

This was about 1950 and Dad then managed Jarvie's property until it was sold. He then went share farming with Maurice Grady and Ivan Marks. They grew peas and potatoes as well as swedes. He also spent some time working at the ambulance station in Central Sydney.

The first home I ever knew was a small two bedroom farmhouse in Duckmaloi. It was a small house but during that period I learned the values of hard work, resilience and community. As I



was the only boy I had to make sure I kept the fire going, milked the cow and trapped rabbits, which I was able to sell for six shillings and sixpence at Arthur Macarthur's. I also helped Dad with the peas and potatoes as well as helping the neighbour mark his lambs. I was never short of pocket money.

I started school around the age of eight because there was no school bus from Duckmaloi before then. I attended St Joseph's school and was a reasonable student. I particularly enjoyed Maths. There was a tennis court at the school and a shed where I would spend time practising. I thought I was all right at tennis. I remember the nuns telling us that the kids from Black Springs were going to come to Oberon on the bus and that we should make them feel welcome. I thought, "I'll make them feel welcome all right." But they taught me a lesson! The Gibbons, the Hothams and the Hanrahans – they took me down a peg. I got the flogging of my life.



Cheryle, Dennis, Patricia and Noel in front of the Duckmaloi house

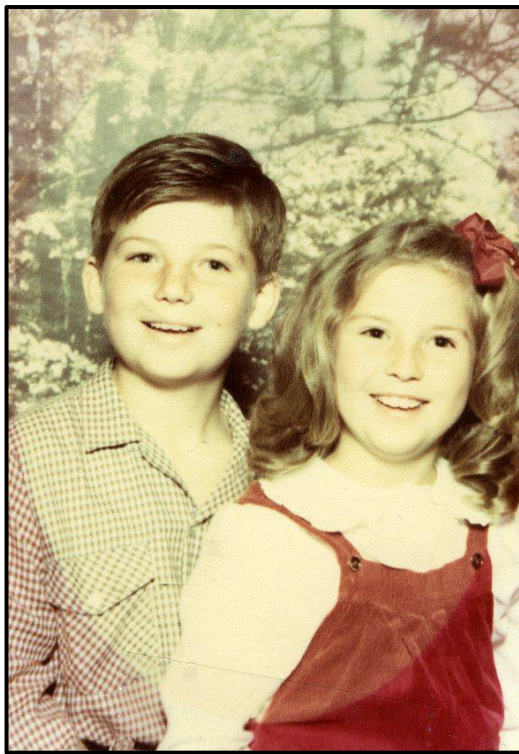
I completed the Intermediate Certificate in 1963 and left school to take up a position with the Bank of New South Wales, now Westpac. My first posting was Oberon and I spent about 18 months here before being transferred to Rylstone, doing hand ledgers and all the technical records by hand. While I was there I was also the local milkman. The fellow who owned the milk run in Kandos wanted someone to service Rylstone so I used to get up every morning around 5am and do the milk run before going to work at the bank. My work ethic was already well formed by then.

My career with the bank lasted 13 years and took me across New South Wales. I worked in many different branches - Rylstone, Bathurst, Orange, Rockley, Griffith, Boolaroo and Bank Corner in Newcastle, gaining experience in communities big and small. The highlight of my life was when I was transferred to Rockley as second in charge. There were only two of us there!

In 1968, when I was working in Orange, I met my future wife, Cheryl. Cheryl was nursing at Bathurst Base Hospital and was the eldest of five children of the late John and Valma Wade of Warners Bay, Newcastle.

We married and went on to have two children, Brett, born in 1971, and Tanya in 1974. Brett completed Year 12 and initially intended to join the police force, however his career path changed and he went on to pursue a career as a diesel mechanic. Tanya also originally planned to join the police force, after gaining experience with the Highway Patrol in





Brett and Tanya

Bathurst. Her direction shifted when Dereace Wright offered her a hairdressing role. She studied hairdressing at TAFE in Orange alongside Melita Braun, nee Corby, and is now a part owner of Ruby 6 in Bathurst.

When the kids were younger I'd come back to Oberon on weekends or holidays, driving trucks for my Uncle Tom. I always enjoyed driving trucks but it meant the kids missed out on having a real family holiday. Cheryl would sometimes take them on holiday with her parents. In 1977, when I was back here working, I met John Mawhood and he said they were having trouble finding somebody to cart their groceries up from Sydney. So I said I would do it. So, I resigned from the bank, having risen to assistant bank manager, and we moved back to Oberon to start my own carrying business. When my Uncle Tom heard that I was coming back he offered me a brand new truck, saying, "Pay me back when you can. I don't even care if you don't pay me." He said, "You can do the pea

carrying now and bring the groceries back." That's how it all started.

I commenced carting peas, swedes and potatoes to Sydney and returning with groceries and hardware for SE Mawhood & Sons P L (now Mawhood Bros, Supa IGA and Mawhood Hardware P L). In those days there would only be about six or eight pallets of groceries a week, and now we deliver groceries every day of the week.

A few years after that, Uncle Tom was cutting back and he said to me, "You'd better take those two trucks." He gave me a Mack prime mover and semi-trailer and another one, and he said, "It's the same deal. Pay me back when you can and if you don't pay me back I won't lose any sleep." I paid him back over time.



Celebrating Uncle Tom's 90th birthday at Oberon Golf Club

In 1980 I added stock cartage with an ACCO 1830 and my first customer was Trevor Jarrett from The Meadows, Hazelgrove, with my Uncle Tom giving me loads when needed. About 1984 young Tommy (O'Connell) was winding back on stock carting and Colin Brett, the Oberon agent, was giving me a lot of work.



One of the last loads of peas sent to Sydney in hessian bags. Taken just before the industry switched to packing peas in boxes.

Over the next 16 years I had 4 decker sheep crates going with top operators - Peter Booth, his son David Booth, David Dunbar, Hector Crawford and Stuart Booth. Over this time Homebush Saleyards, Gosford and Maitland Abattoirs closed, as well as other abattoirs to the east of Oberon. Also, a lot of graziers shifted from fat lambs to cattle, reducing the number of stock loads required. In many cases the land holdings had reduced as well. At all times Bathurst Saleyards was an important part of our operation and the agents supported us to the end.

However, with Homebush closed, the major part of stock from Oberon was now going to Bathurst. We could not handle the volume on Tuesday afternoon with cattle and Wednesday morning with sheep and lambs. I gave stock cartage away in September 2001.

My son Brett joined me in the business after completing his diesel mechanic course, becoming a co-partner in managing our operations. In the early days we carted pyneboard and christmas trees for Johnny Melino as well as Don and Clem McKinnon. We continued to transport groceries for Mawhoods, loaded and delivered lucerne bales and wool, and carried groceries and other goods for various retailers. At one stage we were carting a lot of water, semi-trailer loads, to Sydney, some of it for export. More recently we have been bringing chocolates from Sydney to Bathurst for repackaging and then taking them back to Sydney.

The industry is far more regulated today. When I started, if you had a problem with your truck you might service it yourself. Not any more. You need a qualified mechanic to sign off on all repairs which can cause delays in operation. You also need to be careful about observing driving limits. Sometimes drivers can get caught out when they change their driving times, starting a bit earlier so they can knock off early. Not long ago I was caught for driving more than my 12 hour limit, even though I had taken my seven hour break.

I was introduced to competition golf by Reg Cunynghame, who always joked about playing the 19th hole. I had one proper golf lesson and from there I was hooked. Golf became a passion and has stayed with me ever since.

One of the greatest joys of my life is watching my grandchildren play sport and spending time with all eight of them - Tye, Jia, Kobi and Tahnee Siakisoni and Koa Bowman, as well as Summer and the twins, Tahlia and Kade O'Connell. Between them they have had many outstanding school and sporting achievements. One of my grandsons is now a teacher and he says he's been the horse all his life and I've been the jockey, driving him all the time! One granddaughter is about to start university and I've said to her, "Get on the bus and get it done."

Each of our grandchildren brings something special to our family and watching them grow into capable, determined young people is one of my life's great blessings.

Cheryl and I have travelled extensively over the years. We made several trips around Australia, then explored the United Kingdom, visiting London, Scotland and Wales. While in London we met Cheryl's niece Jenna and her husband, a QANTAS pilot based at Heathrow. We rode the London Eye and visited Buckingham Palace.

In Paris we explored the Louvre and admired the Eiffel Tower. Venice was a highlight, sitting on a balcony watching the canal traffic. Next, we took a cruise from Canada to Alaska. Cheryl's sister lives in Mexico so we went to San Diego, hired a car, and drove down to Mexico and spent a week there.

In 2019 we travelled through China with Peter and Lorna Ryan, Loretta Graham and Jenny McCarthy, visiting the Great Wall and the Terracotta Warriors. That was just months before Covid began to spread across the world.

Coming back to Oberon in 1977 with that sense of passion felt right. It's the kind of town that gives you more than just a postcode, offering community and a sense of belonging. I have always believed in contributing and supporting our community and, over the years, I have sponsored and contributed to Oberon Senior football, Soccer and the Oberon Golf Club, as well as other organizations.

I'm lucky to have Cheryl, who has been very supportive. I could have married someone who wouldn't have settled into what I do. It's not for everyone. She reared the family and did all the cooking, all that sort of thing. I nearly know how to boil water now!

There are fewer and fewer small carriers these days. You've got the Linfox fleet, Coles and the multinationals. They're allowed to bring in foreign workers and are getting into a lot of the smaller work. We've got six trucks now. Up until about 12 months ago we were working for Boral but they sold their part of Highland Pine to AKD so we advertised three trucks for sale and two of them sold. It's very hard getting good staff and the road over the Mountains is a nightmare at the present time. There's so many accidents and holdups. Nearly every week there's a couple of accidents. A fatality could close a road for hours, even a minor accident can close a road for an hour. It's a disruption. (Editor's note - These comments were made prior to the closure of the pass at Mount Victoria on March 6th, 2026)

At 78 I'm still out there doing what I love, driving the truck and meeting the incredible people who make every journey special. One day I'll hang up my boots and, while that moment will carry some sadness, it will also be filled with gratitude for a lifetime of memories. I'll be turning 79 in 2026 and I'm very thankful for every chapter so far.

(March, 2026)