

Helen Freeth

Before you read, I would like you to know that, with pride in my families, I accepted the challenge and honour of being one of the Oberon Treasures. I consider the families I came from to be true “treasures” and I am merely the person left to tell the story

In 1941 Australia had three prime ministers, with the year culminating with my birth in November and Pearl Harbour in December. Eight days after I was born Australia declared war on Japan. Calamities they may have been but Australia survived all of it!



I was born into two families who had lived in the Oberon district for some time. My father's family were the Hughes family – Arthur, my grandfather, and his wife Lottie Lillian (nee Mackie) from Sofala. Their offspring were Isobel (Poppy), Arthur (Bob), Tom, John (Jack) and Robert William (Bill), who was my wonderful father. The Hughes family lived at Gingkin.

The Hughes brothers, L to R: Bill, John, Tom & Bob

My mother's family were the Whiteleys, who lived in Oberon – James (Jim) and his wife Emily Selina (nee Bailey). Offspring were John (died at three months), Elvie, Herb and Sheila. Sheila was my clever, creative and kind mother. My brother Bob was born in 1952. We were children born to the youngest of two families.

My great uncle Bob Mackie, Lottie Lillian's brother, was sent to war twice – his brothers were also in uniform. My father's brothers were rejected by the army. Uncle Bob had to run the farm as the eldest brother after Grandpa Hughes died at 57. (The horses didn't get him to medical help in Bathurst quickly enough.) Tom was a diabetic, John had eyesight problems so he went to the Burragorang Valley to grow vegetables as a war effort. That left my dad.

My father, Bill Hughes, went to Bathurst to train at the old Sheep and Cattle Drome, which I believe was also used as a migrant hostel. If my father was away, my grandmother Lottie used to insist on Mum and I sleeping at her place in case prisoners got out of the prison camp. Dad belonged to the VDC (Volunteer Defence Corps). His clothes were always ready to go to war.

Life at Gingkin was happy, predictable but confronting at times - no electricity, cold weather, distance from the shops. Petrol coupons were required to get fuel, as well as money.

My dad trapped rabbits, did wool classing and helped his brothers with fencing. The Hughes family had jobs for each person, e.g. Uncle John grew vegetables, Dad looked after the meat supply and the meat house, Grandma cooked, cooked and cooked some more. They all came to the big house for coffee each morning at 10.30. Coffee was on the open fire, with milk warming close to the coals. As they left to go back to work, they would grab Jacki Winters (big Gingkin rock cakes) for their pockets – no Tupperware, no cling wrap or foil. The Jacki Winters would keep them warm, hopefully until they were eaten.



Helen with her mother Sheila, circa 1943

Gingkin Post Office had a postmistress, Mona Behan, who put through calls (sometimes saying, “You won’t get Gingkin 4 as they have just gone to town” or maybe “No use trying Gingkin 7 as they are pea picking”). The postmistress looked after the mail. Mona probably knew everything about everybody but told nothing! She ignored the time limits, to put through calls at any time. A great postmistress if ever there was one.

Each night Mona would ring elderly people to check on them. If they didn’t answer she would get a neighbour to check on them, maybe a few kilometres away, maybe more. My dad was often called on to check people.

Dad and his brothers were also used by the police to locate bushwalkers or lost people around Kanangra Walls or Jenolan Caves. One time in a snowstorm, a bus arrived at my grandmother’s house with bushwalkers – uni students looking for shelter. Food and shelter were somehow provided by my resourceful grandmother Lottie Hughes.

Lottie Hughes was tall and elegant, even in an old apron feeding the ducks and chooks and guinea fowl. She wore her skirts almost to her feet. On her marriage certificate her occupation was dressmaker. She always said a sewing needle was the most precious possession in the Australian bush.

I was a war baby, born in Nurse Fox’s residence with Dr Perkins present. My brother, Bob, was born in 1952, in the maternity section of Oberon Hospital, with Dr Robey in attendance. My brother was clever, considerate and very kind. Bob Hughes broadcast from the ABC and many other Sydney radio stations. He ran our parents’ farm too. He died in 2020.

There was no school at Gingkin, no bus service, not enough petrol or time to take me each day to Oberon over bumpy pot holey roads. There was school at Oberon or correspondence school – lessons sent from Sydney. Uncle Herb Whiteley was consulted, as he was a primary principal. Oberon school, living with the Whiteley grandparents, was his choice and so it was to be: Grandma and a (mostly sick) Grandfather considered their home as my home, luckily.

Certainly, Grandma Whiteley was as determined that I should become a teacher (four of her offspring/grandchildren were teachers) as Grandpa was I should try his cheese. It came in a small blue pack marked “Kraft” and was wrapped in silver that they now call foil. He unwrapped this small parcel as if it were gold and rewrapped it after he had cut off a piece, with appreciation and anticipation of the next time he ate.

By the time I was born, horses were being replaced by vehicles of some description, although, near where the post office is now, there was a spot where people left their horses. The Oberon Post Office and Cashens store were down the hill in Raleigh Street. Inside the Oberon Post Office was a big room where you might wait on wet days. It was so civilized.

When I was a child, Oberon had the main street with shops – grocery and hardware combined was the big shop Mawhoods. Howells had departments catering for women and groceries with a most marvellous contraption. The grocer served you from behind a counter – I think he added it up, put it in a small box like a purse, pulled some string and it all went up to the cashier, who took the money and gave change. She was sitting up high in a box like a “money pulpit” (my name). There were garages, a doctor’s surgery, Peter’s Café, Kanbara Milk Bar and Harrisons for clothes. Peter’s Café had a dish of warm chocolate they dipped their ice cream into, I remember – and on the rare occasion you tasted their chocolate ice cream it was even better than it looked. There were churches and a hospital. My mother had had a “main street job” previously, as an accountant in Fox’s Imperial Stores, before she married to go “bush”. The sign is still on the building next to the Milbury. The Malachi Gilmore Hall was opened before I born, in 1937. It was the centre of social activities – films, weddings, concerts, flower shows, everything.

When I started school, as a child from the bush, I had had no contact with germs. I quickly became infected with whooping cough and pneumonia in both lungs. I almost lost all of a year (Year 1, First Class). Life was with my mother and grandmother looking after me with Dr Perkins calling every day. There were no modern drugs but Grandma used old methods, handed out with kindness and love.

A big amount of change went on in Oberon during the time I went to primary school. The Cotton family came and began developing what was later to be the biggest industry in town – TIMBER MILLS. Peas, turnips and potatoes were still grown for a while. Sheep, most for prime lambs, and cattle for beef continued to be a feature of Oberon. Electricity was now more common.

At about Year 5 or Fifth Class (as it was called) my mother came to town to live, partly because she felt Grandma needed a rest and partly because she was pregnant with my brother. Dad often stayed out when the farm demanded but came in often.

Some things remained the same. I went to school, started learning the piano at the Convent. My parents didn’t have a piano so I had to ride my bike quickly each afternoon from one school to the other. Because I practised the piano while the nuns prayed, if I strayed from the prescribed music for AMEB examination the young music teacher would leave her prayers to say strict words to me. I did well at exams because I had my music teacher’s ear while God had her devotion.

Quite a number of rural families moved to town “for the kids to get an education”. It usually happened when the eldest child got into Sixth Class and the academic work from the Correspondence School became too demanding for those teaching them with limited education themselves.

Oberon started getting people from overseas. I remember a Maori family, Dutch people and others came to work here. At the school, ex-pupils started to return to teach.

When we were in Sixth Class at lunchtimes on bad, freezing days we were allowed to pull the partition back (it is still there!) to do popular dances like the barn dance during lunchtime. I felt grown up by the ways the teachers treated us. It was a civilised and happy way to spend snowy lunchtimes as well as get to know the High School students.

My favourite day at school was Commonwealth Day, when we all went back home at lunchtime. That was unimaginable freedom!

The worst days at school was sports days or Fridays where we played softball all year around. Sewing was worse. I was always in trouble for talking in sewing and unpicked every seam more than once. The bloomers I finally completed could never be worn as the teacher had cut out two fronts. Somebody else must have had two bottoms!

Oberon primary school prepared me for PLC Orange, and indeed for life itself.

Orange Presbyterian Ladies College was chosen by my parents. It was an emotional break from my brother Bob and my parents and grandparents.

The school offered everything except a thorough education and any basic science. My parents chose French and German for me instead of cooking and sewing. The older German teacher, Dr Shearer, fascinated me immediately as she taught in German from the start. I had never heard a foreign language.

The school had an authoritarian principal, but many strong friendships were made there. I enjoyed the music too. We were given names of who we sat with, which rooms we slept in, but despite this I made many wonderful friends. My parents were dismayed at the school’s published results so offered me alternatives.

Bathurst High was everything I needed. There were great teachers, especially Mr van Wierst for German. It was now possible to catch up academically and plan for a career. I boarded with an outgoing, friendly family near the high school and they helped me out of my shyness.

In 1959 I took a Teachers College Scholarship for Bathurst Teachers College, where music became important to me again. I played for the College choir in the Sydney Eisteddfod. Two great years were spent training for a job I couldn’t wait to begin.



1960 Helen’s Teachers College graduation

Begin I did, but not in a place I would have chosen - Nyngan. So far away from Oberon, so hot, mosquitos all night, with about 56 Kindergarten children. A young male teacher from the high school section of the Central school asked me out in his VW on Saturday nights to an open-air picture theatre. He picked me up to go to church on Sundays too. Then, he transferred to Sydney to continue his training.

After Nyngan I spent two happy years at Eglinton Demonstration School before getting married to the fellow with the VW - John Freeth - in 1965. Working at Eglinton was a lot more work than normal teaching as we, Rod Wells and I, gave demonstrations each Tuesday on teaching multiple classes to second year students. We also rewrote two Gilbert and Sullivan plays so they were suitable for primary children. We performed them with the children. I belonged to the Bathurst Carillion Theatrical Society and Rod had a musical background. He ended up principal of many large schools in Queensland as well as SCEGGS Redland.

After my marriage I taught at Greenacre. Sydney was quite lonely and the school held its own challenges but I had some success writing for children in the USA. After teaching reading to children, I decided there must be a more exciting way to develop the knowledge of sounds. I saw an article about an artist, Jackie Jones, so contacted her through the Women's Weekly and we developed imaginary characters using set sounds. In 1969 'The Zoopie Zats' was published in Australia and then America by Horwitz and their overseas connections. The rest of the series was withdrawn after the American publishers objected to an imaginary character's skin colour!

During this time John worked on his Science degree and subsequently completed his Masters of Education.

Selina was born in 1967, Geoffrey in 1969 and Leonie in 1971. We spent a year in Molong before John was offered a job in Goulburn, at the Goulburn College of Advanced Education, training teachers. John became a senior lecturer. I taught casually and then permanently at the same time as upgrading my teaching qualifications to four year trained. I finished up taking a job using my Special Education training running a special unit for children with language/speech disorders. It was exacting work at times but I loved it.



Leonie, Geoffrey & Selina Freeth

Our children were well catered for at Goulburn High School. We stayed there over twenty years. Selina studied for a BA, then a Master of Education, Geoffrey did Veterinary Science and Leonie Civil Engineering. The CAE where John had worked closed to become a Police Academy. With that our world closed too. Selina became very sick and died and Geoffrey died a few years later.



John, Selina, Geoffrey, Leonie
& Helen Freeth

Later when I had transferred to West Bathurst and was teaching German one day a week, I received a Goethe scholarship from the German Government to study in Germany. I was based in Stauten, Southern Germany, for three months. It was an incredible experience.

My final appointment for teaching was to Oberon Public School where I had begun as a pupil in 1947. What a lovely way to end. After retiring I taught casually there, clinging on to a career I enjoyed so much.

My daughter Leonie qualified as a civil engineer and has always been a marvellous support and help. John lost his battle with cancer not long after the death of my brother, Bob, in 2020.

Our grandchildren are a reminder of better times and, later, great grandchildren had the same effect.



Helen & Bob

I continue the family farm with the first-rate help of some local people. Their knowledge and resourceful approach to problem solving never ceases to amaze me. I am very grateful to all our helpers, past and present, I have been lucky enough to employ.

After reading other people's stories I realize many of the Oberon themes are similar - growing up helping with potatoes and pea picking, my dad on a farm with sheep and cattle. We have similar backgrounds in agriculture or pine growing but we are all blessed to have lived here.

While Grandma, Lottie Hughes, was determined I should own and run the land, Grandma Whiteley was determined I should become a teacher, as she had been for a while. Looking back and seeing how my life turned out, both should have been happy, as both the predictions and hopes of these two wonderful women came to be!

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