

Helen Dawson - January 2022



I would not be here without the heritage of the DNA of my forebears - I have inherited a sense of place and space.

Great grandfather McBride first arrived from the United Kingdom in 1852. He tried his luck gold prospecting at Bendigo, then went back to England for a few years, before returning to take up land in South Australia.

His first lease was east of Burra and he then founded an extensive business with merino sheep and mining interests - in later life he became a substantial benefactor to the Methodist Church.

His seventh son, Albert James, carried on the pastoral business.

Thomas the sheep man

My grandfather Thomas McBride married Rosina, a Cornish miner's daughter - my father was the twelfth of their twelve children. Thomas was a sheep man, who also loved horses. My father's two eldest brothers rode in the charge of Beersheba. They lived on a station east of Burra.

My maternal grandfather George Green-

field and his brother took up lease country north of Port Augusta known as South Gap Station, in 1881.

In 1901 the partnership was dissolved and George took up the lease which became known as Purple Downs known locally as 'The Purple'.

Purple Downs is no longer a station because it is the site of the Olympic Dam Mine.

George's wife, Edith Alice, was the other grand planner in my past. She went to work on the station to look after George's four children after his wife died, she subsequently married him and had nine children of her own. My mother was number eight. Her father died when she was nine, in 1922.

Mother and son

Edith Alice ran the station with the help of her eldest son and also took up more leases. All her children were sent to boarding school during and after WW1. The Greenfield stations were in much drier country than the Mc Bride stations which makes my grandmother's achievements all the more creditable

My parents married when my father returned from the Middle East, in 1944 - they gained a soldier settlers block in Western Victoria.

Being an only child, I immersed myself in the garden, helping with the sheep and communing with dogs, cats, all sorts of poultry and a horse.

I recall the shearers objecting to the guinea fowl beginning the day adjacent to the shearers' quarters.

School by the river

School was thirty miles away by Bedford bus at Balmoral. There was no classroom space for grade three and four at the school, so Mrs Bloomfield taught fifty children in a hall down the hill next to the Glenelg River. I suppose the noise kept the snakes away.

Basic reading writing and arithmetic was brilliantly taught. I learnt to sew on a treadle sewing machine. It was easy to go backwards and break the thread.

Lasses finished at grade ten. Dad believed women should not be farmers.

I went to boarding school at age thirteen - there were so many new experiences. There was Christianity, organized sport, music, art, literature and history and teenage girls' society. There were weekend exeat three times a term when I sometimes stayed with day girls' families.

In year nine chemistry and physics became separate subjects. The boarding school experience was formative, being traumatic at first. Then I grasped the opportunities.

On to Adelaide University

I was able to continue to Adelaide University and complete a science degree, majoring in organic chemistry and physiology. Botany would have been a better choice.

At that time there was line of site to the Braggs, father and son, who did the early research on DNA. (deoxyribonucleic acid). DNA was described in the 1950s and is the molecule our genes are made of. The discovery started a wide range of beneficial developments in biological science. It was an exciting time.

At home with the family

My first chance at gardening came when I married and stayed home with three children - they played and I dug, sowed and pruned behind the high fence. The soil in Hawthorn, along Brownhill Creek was excellent. I worked at a nursery for a few hours a week, doing cuttings and potting and learning botanical names.

By the eighties I needed to work, so started a business hiring and maintaining potted plants in commercial premises. I got started by spending a day in Melbourne gaining a generous amount of information from a lady who ran a business called 'Carpe Diem' - I went home and seized the day, thinking up a name and cold calling on potential customers. This was a dynamic time.

A growing family

My second husband's daughter joined us, so we had four children with birthdays in four consecutive years. They were well fed, well educated, well mannered and learnt to work, needing to help in the business.

I am proud of the people they have become.

Silvanberries to market

After fifteen years I sold the contracts and we moved to Scott Creek. We purchased the eight hectare block adjacent to the nursery, built a house and planted silvanberries. The first cattle ate the spare grass.

Silvanberries are a cross between a wild blackberry and a raspberry and do not have viable seeds. They are vigorous and prolific and require much pruning and tying. They are picked individually and carefully.

Along the way the Adelaide Farmers Market found me, and I sold frozen berries and preserves and my neighbours' Iceland poppies in winter at my market stall. The poppies were a huge success. Ron bought me the buckets of buds the day before and I bunched them. It was so much fun having such a popular product.

I delivered my berries to the wholesale market at 3am and to shops from 6am.

All this stopped when my husband's dementia progressed. Eventually the Repatriation Hospital social workers found him a place at Strathalbyn hospital. The staff saved us, being so kind and empathetic. He lived there for three years.

Four years ago I decided to move on from Scott Creek - a nice retirement village was recommended.

A farmer at last

I found an affordable and unloved property for me and my animal crew six kilometers from High Street, Strathalbyn.

There is so much to do in the garden and in the outer garden where the cows and calves graze. The girl who was not allowed to be a farmer has arrived. The situation so near Strathalbyn is ideal for me. The town has so much to offer.

I recently drove to Glenelg to have lunch with one of the girls from that special group (or we thought so), the boarders of the class of 1960. During the past sixty years there has been much change and drama. We decided, on balance, we have lived through good times in our peaceful small corner of the world.