

Living in the '70s

Wendi Nichols

Dr John Wilkie once told my father Ern that “if he didn’t watch his eldest daughter – she would come to a BAD END” – **HUH** – I’m still waiting----

To say that I come from a large family is probably an understatement. My dad, Ern Nichols had two brothers and one sister. His mum, Florence Nichols had nine siblings. My mum Joyce (nee Leach) had one brother and one sister, her mum Flo Leach (nee Belshaw) had six siblings and that’s only the tip of the iceberg. I was lucky enough to have four sisters (all younger) who I still consider to be my BEST friends, even though when younger we had the odd blue (another gross understatement). We had a lot of family functions when growing up, most of them held by maternal grandparents Bill and Flo Leach. These were held at their property on the corner of Riverstone Parade and Edward Street, next door to Hoods’ wrecking yard. These functions were attended by everyone that could possibly claim some type of kinship, whether fair or foul and a good time was had by all. Pop would dress up as Santa at Xmas time and Uncle Johnny Leach would supply the music, such as Elvis and a lot of Rock N Roll. The younger kids would play until late.

Typical attendance was Great-Grandma Belshaw, Great-Great Auntie Maudie and husband Jack, at least four great aunts, spouses and children, then the aunts, uncles and cousins too numerous to mention, at least 40 to 50 of us. It was really great because we were all so close knit and even now we don’t need a big excuse to get together, boil the kettle, pour the tea and off we go!! I just have to add that my Nana Leach was a liberal type of person and loved reading, devouring all types of diverse material. I would spend a lot of time with her, weekends, school holidays etc and she passed this love onto all of us girls. My greatest achievement was reading her copy of Harold Robbins ‘Carpetbaggers’ when I was eleven – as it was a fairly explicit (for those days) adult book. I never told Mum until I was in my mid twenties!!!

I hung around a lot with my sister Jennie, who was a year younger than me and we thought we were very ‘special’, too special in fact for the likes of Riverstone which felt very old fashioned, the residents seeming to be a bit out dated and set in their ways – we were in the ‘IN’ crowd. Our great loves when growing up were Bands and music followed by high fashion and I suppose Boys were factored in there somewhere as we grew into our teens. That last bit was probably a bit understated---but---. This from the two girls who at probably 8 and 9, couldn’t understand why our parents wouldn’t take us into Mascot to see the Beatles arriving in the early 60s. But then they did come across with the goods when the Monkees came to Sydney in later years – I actually shudder now when I think of that.

We spent a lot of our pre-early teenage Saturday afternoons going to the matinees at Mr Murray’s Olympia picture theatre in Garfield Road. Elvis featuring largely here (another shudder at this juncture). We would scrape up enough money for some small snacks at intermission (who remembers intermission and also why isn’t it around anymore – think TITANIC etc). Sorry – to continue.....The only Milk Bar we were allowed to go to was the Wattle owned by Mr Notaris, down near Rosenthal’s old shop. We’d all bolt down there for the cheapest portion of hot chips, enviously eying the kids who were allowed to go to the café next door to the pictures. It wasn’t worth the effort of doing the wrong thing at that stage because as sure as eggs were eggs, the minute you stepped a foot wrong, some well meaning customer of Dads would DOB on us.

There was a lot of angst happening with the clothing thing. You had to be dressed “JUST RIGHT” especially if in case somebody you knew saw you. What we didn’t realise was that we probably knew nearly everybody anyway.

When I was in 6th class my mum (a follower of high fashion, herself) bought me my first pair of ‘heels’ from Alan Pfeiffers A&A shoe store in the Main Street, up near the Post Office. They were brown, pointy slingbacks with a bow on the front –they’d actually be OK to wear now and I have a red pair very, very similar.

It was very exciting when the Riverstone Pool opened up or the “POOLS” as it was called by a lot of us – well....there was a small wading pool so pools was correct!!! In summer there was a never ending round of swimming – a lot of good excuses to be made up of why we needed to go swimming. It was hot, wasn’t it, we needed to practise before we went to ‘training’. How important it was if you were a member of the Riverstone Swimming Club. I earned my ½ mile and mile badge in that original pool - I must have swam ten thousand laps....well – it felt like it. Friday nights for the races were also a very social occasion even if you weren’t participating. There wasn’t a lot of swimming done during our daily visits either, gossiping and eyeing off all the Boys and we did spend a lot of time running off the younger siblings and their numerous friends.

It was also good fun when the Circus came to town. It would be set up in the paddock opposite the Infants’ school and later after the first pool was built it was moved over behind it, near the Market Street end. I loved the swingout swings which seemed very daring. Once I won a bowl with George Harrison on it from the moving clowns. I still have it today and as I’m writing this I’m thinking it might have some type of wholesale value (how does E Bay work?).

In 1966 I started High school and in one of our first classes we were asked to put our hands up if we were smacked at home. Of course, Cousin Julie and I obliged and were soooo embarrassed as we were the only ones!!! When complaining to Mum and Dad about it “it’s not fair etc etc” he said “Oh well, next year there’d be another one because Jennie will be there too!!!” He went on to say we were probably the only truthful ones.

When I was in year 9 and 10 I would go riding on my pushbike with my friend Anne Vos, who lived in Edward Street. Her family emigrated from Holland when she was about 12 and her dad worked out at the Scheyville Camp. We would ride up in the bush at the back of Hamilton Street and inspect all the rubbish that had been dumped up there. It was kind of like a free garage sale – I remember on one of his walks my Dad bought home an old bedside chest. I don’t think Mum was impressed then, but just recently we caught Dad trying to pass it off as one of his rare finds, he still keeps it for tools and wouldn’t sell it at a garage sale.

Geoff Pfisters’ Barber shop down near the Commonwealth and National Bank laneway was also a good source for time wasting, especially when he hired a new apprentice, Jim I think his name was. He had very long black hair and was in a BAND!!! The only band we had in Riverstone was the ‘Zodiacs’ with Brian McCombe (now King Brian at RetraVision) and Brian Weaver but their music wasn’t really to our taste.

After I left school and started work in Sydney I talked my Mum into giving me “a nice home perm”. (She did this for a few of our relatives.) Poor Mum – she had this vision of lovely curly ringlets and what actually happened was that it turned out like a Jimi Hendrix AFRO. I was ecstatic. It was just as I had planned. Dad made me grease it with something like Californian Poppy to flatten it, but when I went out I would give it a shake and hey presto – it was frizzy again.

A favourite past time was to catch the first train up to Richmond after the line had been flooded out. My cousin Julie arranged for me to go with her one afternoon. We told our parents we wanted to see the floods, but she was actually meeting a boy her parents didn't approve of. I can tell you now – it was pretty hair raising – the line was moving back and forth with the water at Mulgrave and Clarendon. It was just under the track!! When we arrived at Richmond, I thought it would be a hive of activity, but it was just as dead as Rivo ever was.

We all went to a Big dance held in the Old Picture Show in Windsor (George Street). There were a few minor name Bands and it was supposed to be a Big night. A lot of kids from Rivo went. One I remember distinctly was Owen Binks, who actually has ended up with my cousin Sandra. Owen had very long hair and was also ‘different’ he drove a VW Bug. I must say that even today Owen still sports a mean mullet!!

When I started work in the City life was better, a bit more satisfying, I could shop at brand name stores – (as I had for a few years) BUT it was more on tap – if you know what I mean, like, Merrivale, Cue, In Shoppe etc. You always tried to be dressed properly for every occasion or so I thought – for example you couldn't go to church unless you wore purple blue mascara and false eyelashes on the bottom. A la Twiggy!!

After the perm incident a few of the churches in the town combined to hold a Young Peoples' coffee night at the Baptist church. Jennie and I of course were allowed to go. I wore a new maxi coat with flares and was very pleased with myself, because a lot of the people were shocked at my (modern) outfit.

My Dad was a church elder and had a bit to do with the organising of the Big event. When we were leaving for home and saying goodbyes, Dad asked a few of the boys if they would like a lift back to Schofields. They thanked Dad and said they would walk. Imagine our horror upon hearing the news the next day on the radio that they had all been hit by a drunk driver on the way home and only one survived. Most of them had been in my class in 4th form.

Catching the train to work in the City was an eye opener. I left at 10 to 7 and my sister Jennie left ½ an hour later. Dad would start the car up and gun the motor. I'd run out the door clutching books and makeup etc always running late. One day he reversed out the driveway and as I got to the door he zoomed off down the road – he forget me – how bad was that—

The actual train trip was great – if you travelled in the big old steam train carriages pulled by a big diesel engine. First Class all the way to Central. The seats were like lounges some had tables, we played cards sometimes – all carriages had a toilet and running drinking water. Something which I thought was strange was that when you sat in a particular spot some of the older men seemed cross. What was happening was that we didn't know the seating arrangements. They all had their favourite seats that they sat in all the time.

I was allowed to work at my Dad's business – which most of you knew as Nichols Service Station. I started there officially when I was eleven. I worked mostly Saturday afternoons. I can remember an earlier time when I was probably about five. I had been waiting for Dad to take me home. He was in and out of the office (which was down near the bank laneway in Garfield Road at that stage). I thought I might like to try out the phone which was a large mysterious affair up on the wall with a windy handle. I had to climb on a box to use it but couldn't get it to actually work. I was amazed when Dad told me later that I wasn't allowed to touch the phone – wow – how did he know – well, Riverstone was on an exchange then and the receptionist had rang him back to DOB on me – sprung again!!!

Some visits to the garage were met with great trepidation. If Grandma Nichols was in attendance, we had to endure an underwear 'inspection'. She would always check us to make sure we had the correct cold weather accessories, such as singlets (fleecy), spencers (long) and yep, you guessed it warm undies (fleecy). How embarrassing – we always did though.

After the garage had moved up the road to opposite the Uniting Church we would spend a lot of time cleaning the shelves and rearranging the stock which wasn't always allowed – but it looked better – didn't it? My Great Grandfather, old 'Pop' Nichols, would be sitting in the corner near the cash register, a regular fixture even in later years, sipping his endless cups of black tea followed by the big procedure of taking a **Bex** (which we sold singly in 1 dose). He would keep an eagle eye on us to make sure we were on our Best Behaviour – I suppose he dobed on us too!!! Looking back it must have driven Dad, Grandma and Pop to distraction having us just drop in to help out, but they were more encouraging when we were older and earning a wage there. It was good because we earnt a bit of pocket money to enable us to buy our own clothes and be a bit more independent.

My Dad particularly gave me a good grounding in how to deal with all sorts of people during work and also in life and my Mum taught us that there was another world outside Riverstone, and I don't mean that in a Bad Way.