

# *Recollections of My Elderly Brother Harris* (Growing up in Schofields)

*Olga Robshaw*

*This is an edited version of a speech written by Olga to be read at her brother Harris Davis' 80th birthday. It is printed with the kind permission of the family.*

As a small, very shy, and rather plump little girl, I always thought that my older brother, Harris' principal role in life, was to ensure I knew my place in the pecking order, and that I didn't attempt to challenge his four year age seniority and superiority. He went about his self appointed task by teasing, and heckling, but looking back, the age gap was perhaps bridged when I was in my early teens, and active on our tennis court.

Our childhood was idyllic - our parents' lightly wooded 25 acre property, bordered by a creek and neighbouring paddocks, was our playground, where we could wander freely without fear of molestation.

When I first started at Schofields School (three miles away) a square rig buggy driven by a Mr Hanson was my transport, along with seven or eight local youngsters. My brother found this a great source for teasing, calling me a baby as he sped by on his bicycle.

School holidays were carefree - as there were no girls living close by in our rural community, I was permitted to 'tag along' on excursions with my brother and his friends as a kind of second class male, earning my place in this select young male society by meekly accepting the menial tasks of fetching and carrying and generally making myself useful.

The thick maze of prickly bushes bordering one section of creek pulsated with the cheerful calls of goldfinches, red heads, blue wrens, and other small bird life. It was here where we spent many happy hours on bird trapping expeditions. It was very important to a 'second class boy' like me to learn how to emulate the example of my brother and his friend Jim, to wriggle noiselessly on my stomach to place the traps containing the 'caller' bird in place. The silent wait for results whiled away many childhood hours.

As a 'follower' I waited patiently at the bottom of trees for my brother Harris and his friend Jim, as they scaled up what seemed incredible heights to raid birds nests for eggs (collecting and 'blowing' eggs for their collection was a brief craze.)

A young magpie named Jacko, who apparently had fallen out of his nest, became a much loved family pet after one of these excursions. I also remember my mother being given the task of trying to rear a young owl, all beak, and practically no feathers.

Another source of fun was for us to ride, bareback through the maze of prickly bush, on Dad's old draught horse, Lassie. However Lassie secured revenge on her young tormentors one day, by charging under an overhanging tree branch, just high enough for her to clear, but sweeping we three young riders, Harris, a 'city slicker' Bruce Ward Smith, and I off.

A suspension bridge, strung high above the creek was also a great source of fun, adding to our spirit of adventure. It also presented a great opportunity for a sadistic older brother to torment a young sister, by swinging the ropes vigorously when she was halfway across the bridge!

Fishing was also a very popular activity, using rods fashioned from wattle branches, with wattle gum for adhesive, and often a bent pin for a hook.

Bakers Lagoon some miles away was the scene of many of our fishing excursions - until I committed the unpardonable sin of catching the very large goldfish for which Harris and his mate Jim had been angling for more than a year. I was really sent to 'Coventry' over this cardinal sin, being made to trail about six paces behind, in uncomfortable silence as we walked home.

Perennial floods in Eastern Creek often brought flood waters up to my father's middle paddock, but Harris and I found the 'pickings' good, as we salvaged pumpkins and other vegetables, washed down stream from a flourishing Chinese market on what we called 'Cow Flat'.

Harris and Jim built a number of canoes from corrugated iron, hammered flat, and soldered together, to launch in our creek, with varying degrees of success. The most memorable occasion for me was when their newly built canoe capsized, on its initial launch, catapulting both paddlers into the muddy waters. Perched on a branch overhanging the water, I watched as they struck out desperately to swim to the bank, only to find that they were in a mere 18" of water. Their frantic (but quite unnecessary) swim to safety, made me laugh so heartily that I too fell into the water.

As our bedraggled trio wended its way back up the hill to home, I again had to trail some paces behind the pair, who were very annoyed I had been a witness to their embarrassment.

Mushrooming was also another popular activity after rain, with Pye's Paddocks (some miles away) the most rewarding area for picking. We always kept a watchful eye on the brahmin cattle grazing nearby, and on a number of occasions had to scramble hurriedly through the barbed wire fences to safety.

Bush pilots who at times parked their flimsy aircraft on paddocks between Schofields and Quakers Hill, in between barnstorming exhibitions in the country, were also a great source of curiosity. We watched with interest as they patched up their planes in what surely could only be described as a 'shoestring' operation. Times were tough, and they certainly lived 'rough'. This area was later to become the landing strip for planes from a British aircraft carrier during World War 11, when the carrier was in port. Later it became the small private Schofields' Airfield.

Life in the area was never dull, for gliders taking off and landing from an elevated paddock in Rouse Hill was yet another activity which Dad drove us to see.

I still remember the excitement when Dad, along with hundreds of other motorists, responded to a radio call to line the perimeter of Richmond Aerodrome landing strip, when 'Smithy' was making his epic flight from New Zealand. The light had failed, but on signal all the motorists switched on their lights, and 'Smithy' was able to land safely.

Our paternal grandparents, Nanny and Puppa Davis, lived at Riverstone on several acres of land. I remember a number of Christmas dinners there, when our family joined other relatives to tuck into the huge country style spread. Centre piece was always a pig's head, with the traditional apple tucked

into its jaws.

Nanny, who cooked the most wonderful 'brownies' in her wood stove, was usually up before dawn to prepare the Christmas feast, and despite having to cope with searing temperatures in her kitchen, always appeared serene, and happy that her family was there to share Christmas. I still remember the curing 'green bacon' hams and 'black pudding' sausages which hung from the kitchen's smoke stained ceiling.

Puppa, who these days would probably be described as having a 'short fuse' loved to sit on his front verandah, and to await for one of his old adversaries, Mr Bliss to pass by. They would exchange mutual insults, such as 'scab' etc. which appeared to make their day. I'm sure they both enjoyed these encounters! Puppa kept a ready supply of cow dung, to burn to keep the mosquitoes at bay. My memories of him include his traditional Sunday morning breakfast, when he enjoyed a very large plate of steak and pungent onions. No wonder he suffered from high blood pressure!

He also enjoyed 'entertaining' any family gathering with songs of interminable length, accompanied by a concertina; also provoking a skittish display from his horse, as it pulled the family sulky, to impress any spectators who happened to be nearby, with his horsemanship.

The depression between Schofields and Riverstone was called Bliss's Hollow and I remember always diving under a car blanket in the back seat when we were being driven home, because Harris had assured me there was a GHOST there. Even when I was a teenager riding home with some girl friends at night from a CWA Younger Set dance, I always pedalled harder when I reached the hollow, to escape this imaginary ghost.

Before a bathroom was added to our Schofields' home, our nightly 'tub' when we were small, was taken in front of the kitchen stove.

In times of drought (before the advent of a city water supply) Harris and I really enjoyed being loaded up on the family dray, with the copper, washing, picnic lunch (and bath tub) to make our way to the creek. We kids thought this was quite an enjoyable adventure, but to my mother (brought up with all the refinements of a North Shore home) it must have proved quite a chore. The same round bath tub and hot water from the copper ensured we had a good cleansing scrub before we headed for home.

A large underground well, built by my father, stored ample drinking and domestic water for our house. One of Harris' chores was to hand pump water up to a small elevated tank, to ensure our house water supply. Always a salesman, he regularly managed to convince his friends this was a fun thing to do, and he was never short of volunteers to carry out this task.

A significant milestone in our young lives, was the connection of our property to a city water supply, followed some years later by an electricity service. Diplomatically, we were jointly given the privilege of switching on the lights for the first time in our home.

Dad was given charge of a water standpipe outside our property, from which property owners without a city water supply could fill up their tanks in times of drought.

There was much excitement when 'Cow Flat', an area on the other side of our creek, which featured a circular road around some rather ramshackle farms and houses was 'discovered' as an ideal racing track for motor cycles.

So this normally sleepy country circuit became the mecca for top Australian racing motor cyclists, and the locals (including my brother and his mate Jim) enjoyed the cacophony of sound, fumes and spectacle, with hundreds of motor cycle enthusiasts from many parts of the Eastern states. The racing circuit was used for a number of years, until other venues proved more attractive. Dad, of course, was kept busy supplying water from the standpipe, to water the track between races.

Harris for a brief time bred Yorkshire canaries, which he exhibited at various caged bird shows, with some success. When he moved on to other interests Mum inevitably ended up being the 'carer' of course.

We both shed tears when our pet fox terrier, Tim, died after being shot by a distant neighbour. We both felt we had lost a loved family friend. He had accompanied us on so many of our excursions, and we missed him immensely.

My brother spent many holidays with Aunty Olga and Uncle Bill at Normanhurst, revelling in the company, particularly of our cousin Heather, and being taught billiards by our grandfather, 'Da' Harris.

Meals were sometimes an ordeal if Da Harris was around, for he would circle the round table at which we children were seated, and if we weren't sitting up straight, he would poke a cane down the back of our clothing. One really had to watch their 'P's and Q's' when he was around!

Heather also loved to come and stay at Schofields with us, and got involved with the bilycart rides downhill, and rambles through the bush.

Our French grandmother (Francelene) who was meticulous about the correct use of the English language, was a strict task master on speech. If we excelled in any particular school subject, we took after her, but any other traits which she considered undesirable, were darkly referred to as being inherited from Dad's family!

Other relatives who also played a significant part in our lives when we were young, included Dad's sister, Aunty Lil, and her husband Frank Norris, with whom Dad and Mum often enjoyed playing cards (500). Uncle Frank always encouraged players to hold their hands up high. No wonder! If their backs faced a large wall mirror, their cards could clearly be seen!

Dad's brother, Uncle Ern, a naval man, was always a popular visitor, arriving with Aunty Chris, who rode pillion on his 'Indian' motor cycle. We all admired Aunty Chris' beautiful braids, which she wound around her head, and tucked securely under her motor cycle helmet.

My father eventually replaced our T model Ford, with a new Ford tourer. I remember our car ending up in a deep culvert near the turnoff into Windsor Road, (due to the stiffness of the steering wheel). My mother sustained a broken jaw, which later had to be wired, and Harris, Heather and I secured a lift from a passing truck, loaded with cabbages and cauliflowers for the produce markets. Harris and Heather rode precariously on top of the produce, on the back of the truck, but my brother teased me for quite some time afterwards about being the 'baby' who had to ride in the truck cabin.

Our father always believed that if there was a track, it could be accessed by our car, and we enjoyed many camping excursions to remote places such as Burragorang Valley in the days when camping was a rare experience. Uncle Bill and Aunty Olga and their family often accompanied us on these excursions.

School holidays were always enjoyable, for they signalled a six week camp at first Dee Why, and later at Avalon Beach, with Jim Fenwick keeping Harris company. I remember the running boards of our tourer being so loaded with luggage, 'chooks' tied up in bags for successive Sunday dinners etc. that Harris, Jim and I had to clamber up and over closed rear doors, to reach the back seat.

The 'chooks' were secured by thin ropes to scrub at the rear of our camp and duly fed and watered until it was time for them to become Sunday dinner. Needless to say pandemonium reigned when several escaped on one occasion, necessitating a frantic hunt through the scrub to recapture them.

The sand hills at the rear of our camp provided a great ski run, with iron utilised as a toboggan for a fast run down the slope, and the rocks were a fascinating playground as we foraged for crabs and cunji for bait. Dad, who was still working through the Christmas period, rejoined us at weekends.

Empire night was always exciting, as family and neighbourhood friends were invited to share the huge bonfires which Dad built on spare land at the rear of our property. Many tales were told long after about basket bombs and sky rockets going off, with Uncle Bill and others joining in the light hearted fun.

At a time when mini-golf was the rage, Harris and Jim created their own mini-golf course, from all types of materials scavenged from the farm. Just as we all eventually mastered the course, interest waned, and other activities beckoned.

I recall when Dad was teaching Harris to drive. Invariably Harris was allowed to take the wheel as we were travelling along the corrugated dirt Blacktown Road - a relatively quiet route. Seated in the back seat, Mum and I had to endure the frequent stops and starts when Dad would order Harris, to "stop the car" when he made some driving error. We didn't enjoy those excursions, for Dad was a hard task master!

When Harris was to be confirmed at St. Paul's Anglican Church, Riverstone, I can remember the frustration the family experienced when our car wouldn't start! Also how the ponderous weight of Mr Dawes, a church elder, and senior Works executive, would cause the pew to act like a mini-seesaw, if we were unlucky to be seated alongside him. He also had the unnerving habit of sternly gazing around the congregation, to see who was behaving appropriately during prayers!

After Harris became interested in playing tennis, on the Marsden Park court of the Griffin family, our father decided to build a tennis court at the rear of our home, utilising a horse and scoop to excavate the sandy loam in our middle paddock, for the court surface.

The court opened a new chapter in our lives, and our 'Woodbrook' court teams enjoyed competing first in the Hawkesbury District Tennis Competition, and then later when district boundaries were changed, to Blacktown District.

Harris was an accomplished player before I started to play in lower ranked district tennis competitions, but I recall the fun we had, on a tandem bike borrowed from family friend Sam Lane, cycling around to round-robin tournaments held on district courts.

In those early days, the sumptuous sponges served up for afternoon tea were very much enjoyed by we teenagers. I still have the very large enamel teapot used to serve afternoon tea on our court, during competition and social games.

On weekends at virtually first light, it was not unusual to find some of our tennis playing friends turning up for a 'hit'.

Tennis players included the very likeable Clarrie Neal (Senior) who thought nothing of walking from Riverstone with his wife and two small sons, to play on our court. A gentleman on and off the court, and a wonderful sport who didn't mind playing with newer players like me in social games, he was probably the most outstanding player in our 'A' competition side.

We also enjoyed competing against other tennis family groups such as the Gallens. We more often than not won on matches played on our home court, but the Gallen court, which featured pines growing very close to the sidelines was another story! We seldom won there, for the Gallens always played the sidelines, giving us no opportunity to effect a safe return. Gordon Barker, who married Eva Gallen, and later became Shire President, was a member of the Gallen's 'The Pines' tennis team.

Other regulars were Sam Lane, whose action on the net was likened to a man standing on a bull ants' nest, his wife Mavis, Bill and Thalia Griffin, the Platt brothers Lance and Hilton, Hector Alcorn and Thelma Bliss.

We have since shared many joys and sorrows with the Lane family, and continued a friendship which started when my father, as a sturdy school boy, prevented a diminutive Sam Lane being bullied on his first day at Riverstone School.

Top riders in our district at that time were Lance Skuthorpe (Senior), a colourful old showman, his daughter Violet and Lance Junior, who lived in an old house near Schofields' Railway Station, with Mrs Skuthorpe and another daughter, Madge.

District rodeos and steer roasts were very popular at the time, attracting big crowds at celebrations to mark the switching on of the 'lights', 'Back to Riverstone' special days etc. The Skuthorpe family of course were the ringmasters.

Harris acquired the use of a big bay horse, Bugle, loaned by the Marriott family, and later bought Duke, a rangy chestnut ex-racehorse, which he enjoyed riding to gymkhanas, and through the surrounding countryside with his mates.

When Harris left school, he was employed in the Test Office at Riverstone Meat Works. Here he met Ted Parsons, Lance Platt, and Stuart Angus, who became family friends. Ted introduced us to Margaret, from Quakers Hill, and they were frequent and welcome visitors to our court, and home.

Thursday nights at our home became regular 'sing-a-long' sessions around the piano, as I played their favourites ballads, such as "Danny Boy", "I'll take you home again Kathleen" etc.

When they were leaving their wedding reception, guests were very amused that Ted joined Harris in the front seat of his borrowed car, and Margaret joined me in the back seat. None of us thought that this was a bit odd! To us it was just four friends together, going for a short drive!

These carefree days, before the advent of World War 11, included regular Saturday night dances on the large back verandah of the Griffins' home at Marsden Park, where Nellie (Griffin) Carr belted out old time dance music on the family piano. Bill Carr, of course, accompanied his wife Nell, and old district identity Bob Beer was said to shake out the moth balls from his special funeral suit, to wear on these occasions.

Trips to Windsor to see the movies were also a popular Saturday night occupation, with a number of us crammed into the dicky seat of Billy Griffin's car. As a teetotaller, Harris was much in demand to pour the drinks at parties, and to drive his less than sober mates home. How times have changed.!

World War 11 ended those carefree days, changing all of our lives forever. Some of our friends and people we had known since childhood were destined to serve with the armed forces; some were lost on distant battlefields, others died in Japanese POW camps. Others like Harris were directed into essential services, backing up the Australian forces by maintaining the food chain.

On reflection, as my brother is about to celebrate his 80th birthday, and I think about the good times that he and his family, and my family have enjoyed, even though we have lived most times in different states, I must admit that having an 'elderly' brother, hasn't altogether been a bad thing!

**.....I LOVE HIM DEARLY, WARTS AND ALL!!!**