

Great Aunties (Pertha 'Auntie Perpie' Morgan)

Heather Smith

Everyone should be lucky to enjoy a great aunt, Aunt Minnie, Auntie Mavis or Aunt Hilda a favourite aunt who never married or married and had no children. Our family had a wonderful Aunt known to everyone as “Perpie” originally christened Pertha after her birth place in West Australia. All her life my two sisters and myself and later our husbands, children and grand children were her family. She was tiny and plump with silver hair and always wore corsets to keep her ample figure in check. Due no doubt to her love of sweet things and she could at all times be relied on for a cake or lolly whenever we visited. She had one unusual trait smoking, a habit, which as children we watched fascinated as the ash on the end of her cigarette grew longer and longer before dropping off.

She did wonderful things for us. She made all our fancy dress costumes to wear at the annual fancy dress ball held each year in the Masonic hall at Riverstone (now the Museum). A long parade of cowgirls, fairies, red riding hoods, shepherdesses and ice skating outfits complete with silver cardboard skates covered in silver paper, emerged from our residence. She taught us how to crochet and knit so we could make dolls clothes and later helped me with my first attempts at sewing when I made an off -the -shoulder blouse from my Red Cross veil.

In the middle 1940's one of the highlights in Riverstone social calendar was the annual debutante ball. Auntie Perpie was determined that no young girl missed out on this occasion due to lack of finances. Long white dresses were borrowed and altered, gloves were supplied and money miraculously appeared for little essentials. Debutants was formerly a custom in England when young ladies were presented at Court to announce their entry onto the marriage market. However at Riverstone it was the first time a young single girl attended a ball wearing a full length white dress, white gloves, silver dance shoes and carrying a posy of flowers. Powdered and perfumed her hair specially washed, set and combed into curls probably set in bobby pins the night before. Sometimes young officers from the Nirimba Naval base at Quakers Hill fulfilled the duty of escorts otherwise it was brothers or boyfriends coerced into Deb practice each week and introduced to the intricacies of waltzing by Mr Syd Heather.

For many years Auntie Perpie not only organized the Deb, balls but also fulfilled the role of Matron of Honor, presenting each Deb to a visiting dignitary and his wife in the RSL hall (now demolished). Once the Swing Waltz or Pride of Erin was completed the debbs and their partners were photographed. The proofs of the photos were inspected a week after at the newsagent, ordered and received back two weeks later.

She loved the Eastern Star, an organisation for the daughters and wives of Masons. The lady members could often be seen on the railway station as they travelled to the meetings in their long white dresses wearing their full regalia of sashes badges and medals. She held the rank of Worthy Matron for many years, I don't know if this organisation still exists. I think in later years she had a go a bowls but she was never very sports minded.

As we grew up Auntie Perpie once again turned her love of small children to the Brownies. She became Brown Owl and taught little girls to cook and earn badges and light camp fires, one Christmas concert she organised the Brownies and they presented Sound of Music to an astounded group of parents and assorted relatives.



Pertha pictured at a number of debutante balls.



Photos: Heather Smith

In 1970 the Riverstone Netball Club was formed and Auntie Perpie became a devoted follower of the girls' netball teams. A familiar figure around the courts in Windsor on a cold Saturday afternoon rugged up and wearing a woolly hat she smoked away still allowing the cigarette to burn to a long ash. Disaster struck when the wind blew sparks from her cigarette into her woolly hat which started to smoke, Auntie Perp oblivious to it all wondered what all the excitement was when her woolly hat was snatched from her head and stamped on, then returned to her head with a large hole in the front. Gradually as she got older and her mind started to slip, the girls would move her from one court to another so she could watch her beloved Rivo girls.

She lived in a flat attached to my sister's house specially built for her and all the kids in the street would congregate there after school. She saved empty cigarette packets and match boxes, silver foil from her cigarette packets and silver milk bottle tops, these were used to build little houses and cars. Endless dead matches were used to play Euchre or Five Hundred, card games we all loved to join in.

We all noticed the decline in Auntie Perp, she would go to the shops every day. and often leave her purse behind at the newsagent, chemist or butcher shops, everybody in the small community of Riverstone knew her and would always ring my sister Nevis so she could pick up Perpie's purse. She loved to go for a walk around Riverstone with her dog. Unfortunately when she became tired she would sit in the long grass on the side of the road for a rest and we would find her faithful old dog sitting in the gutter where would see him as we drove around the streets looking for her. She never failed to amaze us with her love of children and people.

Unknown to us she booked herself into the Quakers Hill Nursing home. We tried to talk her out of this move but she refused and told Nevis that this was the next phase in her life and she had prepared herself for this change. I can't remember the exact time when she rang Nevis to announce that she was engaged to another patient. His name was Max and he was confined to a wheelchair and had no legs, she did not see this as a problem. However short term memory loss had set in and within a few weeks this was all forgotten and no more was heard of Max.

Auntie Perpie passed away peacefully in 1974 at 82 years, loved by a large family of nieces, nephews and friends and often stories of funny encounters with her are still shared at family gatherings and with old timers of Riverstone. Everybody should be so lucky to have an Auntie Perpie.

