

Life in Riverstone During the Depression

Written by Rosemary Phillis after an interview with 'Bubby' Gordon (nee Packer)

My grandmother had five children and when one of her daughters went blind at the age of twelve from meningitis, she gave up the other four children to look after her. The other four, including my father, became State Wards and were sent to live with the Stanford family at Riverstone. Dad was born in 1907 and was only two when he came to live with the Stanfords.

It was a hard life, the children had to help around the place and my father always seemed to get into trouble with Mr Stanford. When he was 13 he went to work at the Meatworks.

He married my mother in 1928 and they had three children. When work became slack during the Depression he was sent to a Meatworks up in the country at Aberdeen. When the Meatworks started to get busy again they called for Dad to come back to Riverstone.

Dad bought five blocks of land in Sydney Street for £35 in 1934. He paid it off at eight shillings a month. You can imagine how difficult it was to earn that sort of money during a strike when they weren't being paid. It must have been a constant worry for Dad, as in his later years when he was dying he would call out "I have to get up and go to work or they'll take the land".

With the payments for the land there was little left to build a house, so Dad built it himself. He cut stumps and poles from the bush and built the supports and frames.

The Schofields lived just up from us in the brick house with the well next to it which had beautiful water. They were very good to us, Mr Schofield used to save feed bags for Dad, who would soak them in a concrete slurry mixture. When they went hard Dad would tack them to the timber frame. Our house was a two room concrete bag house with a dirt floor.

It was something special if Dad came home with a window or a door to put on the house, as until then we just had bags to cover the spaces and keep out the cold. People used to save newspapers and magazines for Mum and she would paste them onto the inside wall with a paste of flour and water. Of a night we children would take the candles and read the magazines on the wall. I believe that is the reason that I can read so well now.

Mum used to keep the dust from the dirt floor down by sprinkling it with damp tea leaves from the teapot. She would sweep it with a broom made of branches from the trees in the bush.

Mum had to work very hard, she had few clothes and had to wash her dress every night so that she had something to wear the next day. She did washing for people to earn extra money. Mrs Shepherd and Mrs Harpur both paid her ten shillings per week for doing all their washing in an old boiler.

She then paid Mrs Harpur two shillings a week to teach me how to play the piano. Mrs Harpur was very strict. She used to sit a penny on each of my hands and if either of the pennies fell off while I was playing she'd hit me with a wooden knitting needle that had a large wooden knob on the end. I still play the piano, for my own enjoyment and down at the Pensioners Hall.

My piano came from my Aunty, Frances Parker, who was very musically talented. Like Dad she came to Riverstone as a State Ward. One of her daily tasks was to bring in the cows for the family. Enid Pettet told me that her family used to hear her singing as she brought the cows in.

When she was fourteen she went to Stanmore to be a housemaid for a lady who lived there. This lady recognised Aunty's musical talent and arranged for her to take lessons. Eventually Aunty became a Professor of Music. As well as singing she could play every musical instrument except the trumpet and went under the professional name of Phyllis Roscoe.

My childhood was an enjoyable one. We may not have had much, but we were always fed and always looked after. During the Depression we had cows and chooks and Dad would bring home bacon dripping from the Meatworks so we had bread and dripping and pepper and salt and loved it.

Mum and many others in those days made 'Waggas' to keep us warm at night. A 'Wagga' was a wheat bag or chaff bag in the centre which then had material patches sewn onto it, to form a blanket. I can remember warming bricks in the oven at night and then wrapping them in old cardigans and putting them in our beds to warm them up.

We were related to the Cooks and the Willis families and sometimes we'd all go for a picnic up the Windsor River and we'd have a great time. We always had something to do, catching cray fish in the gully where the swimming pool is now, swimming out at the stone wall crossing at Eastern Creek or out at the Andrew's place on the Windsor Road. It was good fun.

When I was twelve I would visit Aunty Phyllis who lived with her husband down towards Sydney. We used to give concerts at old people's homes, boys' homes, girls' homes and Long Bay Gaol. When we went to the gaol the Black Maria (a police car) would pull up out the front of Aunty's place and we'd all climb in with the musical instruments and they'd take us into the gaol.

My husband built the house that we live in now. We call it the house that Dick built. When we first moved in it was only the shell of the house, the inside walls had no lining and there were no ceilings below the roof. Gradually though we added these as well as a number of rooms.