**LIFE AT “WILLIS VALE”**

When my grandfather William James Partington died in 1941, in his sleep, beside his wife Annie May, she was left alone with 150 acres of land to look after, as well as a farm to run. “Willis Vale” was a two story house overlooking the Plenty River. By this time the house was over 100 years old, it was built in 1840. My father, his brother and sisters were all born there.

The kitchen was separated from the rest of the house, the same as the homes back in England. The reason for this was, in case of fire, which often happened, when lamps and candles were knocked over, it was easier to put out a fire as the water tanks were just outside the kitchen.

After my grandfather’s death, my parents had to sell our house and move in with Annie May and help run the farm. We all slept up stairs in two bedrooms, there was no bathroom or plumbing, we only had a large jug and basin for washing. If we wanted hot water, we had to go down stairs and out to the boiler, which was in the kitchen, where there was always hot water. Our bath was a big tin tub.

There was no covering between the house and the kitchen. If it was raining you just ran like mad, the same if you needed to go to the old dunny, which had an ivy creeper growing all over it. It was scary for us as small children aged four, five and six. Annie May lived there until she was in her sixties, still milking her cow, and still using the log to cross over the river, now with a walking stick. She still attended church regularly, and visited friends as she had done for years. Can you believe, in those days there were no locks on the doors or windows. She loved gathering blackberries and making jam. I can still taste it today, with scolded cream on scones, yum.

My poor mother had never lived on a farm before; we didn’t have a fridge, only a Coolgardie, a frame with bagging all around it, kept wet, and on top a container filled with water. We were all healthy kids. Most of our food was home grown and home cooked, always plenty of milk, eggs and poultry. Being so young, we didn’t realize how tough things were.

My brother Gary was born in 1943, six years after me. I remember when Gary was about three. On two occasions he couldn’t be found; they searched everywhere, of course the river being the first place, eventually he was found under the floor of the old fruit house. This was where the fruit and vegies used to be kept ready for the market; another time he was found under the fruit house again, this time playing with kittens that had been born there.

Not long after this, mum had taken Gary and the horse and dray up to town to get flour and sugar, which at that time, was in large hessian sacks. On the way home, they had crossed the ford, and were half way up the lane when mum stopped to open the gate, the horse, which had come from the Army, was used to a brake being used when stopped, so of course, it backed down into the river and turned over the dray, everything getting wet, including Gary. Things weren’t very happy at our house for a while.

My father, a policeman, was stationed and working at Heidelberg. This meant that mum had to do almost everything, as well as lighting the fires, washing which was done in a tub and looking after us kids, poor dear. We kids all went to Greensborough Primary School, as those before us had. From Willis Vale, we had to cross the river, as those before had done, on the log bridge with wire to hold onto. Later in 1947, my family moved across the river to a new house at Whatmough. Annie, in her 70s, went to live with her daughter in Greenhills.

The council had bought the land but were not interested in preserving the house. Fires came through in the 1960s and finished it off, it had stood there for nearly 130 years. All that remains are some of the pear trees around the oval today. Now empty, vandals wrecked the old house, sideboards, bookcases full of books, feather mattresses even the organ, all chopped up with axes, it was such a shame. The marble fire place had been imported from Italy, the stove and boiler from Locksmoor in Scotland; the oregan beams were also imported. No one was charged, the vandals were never found, it was so sad for my father and family.

My great grandfather bought the property Willis Vale in 1878; my grandfather had four brothers and two sisters who all lived there. When my grandfather ran Willis Vale, he had a Jersey stud farm and a dairy farm as well as the orchards. When his first wife died in childbirth in 1900, he was left with a one year old daughter, Eva. Her grandmother Sarah Price came to look after her and stayed on at Willis Vale until her death in 1927, even after grandfather’s second marriage to Annie May in 1905. She then helped raise their four children, because Annie May had to help with the dairy and orchards.

My grandfather Will was the first child baptised in the new Methodist Church, built in Main Street, Greensborough in 1872. My grandmother had the same seat in the same pew for over sixty years.

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