

C. J. Francis

I was born in a private house in Durlacker Street Geraldton belonging to the midwife, Granny O'Dea, on July 5th 1921.

I am the eleventh child of John and Agnes Slavin. They had nine girls and two boys.

My earliest memory is from age seven. My brother Maurice died from tetanus. He was chasing kangaroos on horseback when he had an accident and the knife he was carrying stabbed him in the leg. He removed the knife and told no-one about it. Three weeks later he was dead.

I was the first to notice something was wrong with him. I was delivering a letter to him in his room; he was going into lock jaw. I screamed for mother to come and the noise made him worse. Mother sent someone to ring for the doctor. The nearest phone was half a mile away. While we waited mother sponged him down with water and metholated spirits. The smell still brings back the memory.

When I was eight I went to boarding school at the convent in Northampton. I remember crying a lot and a nun rocking me to sleep. I loved the nuns very much.

When I was nine I contracted diphtheria and nearly died. The whole school was quarantined for six weeks. Three children had it. When I woke up, Monsignor Elwin and some nuns were praying around my bed.

In the convent we had to study after school from four to five, then go to prayers, have dinner and help clean up the dinning room, then study again until nine o'clock. Then go to bed. We would go to mass before breakfast and be at school at nine o'clock.

On the nuns feast day, they would take us on a picnic to a place called Deepy. It was a paddock with a deep pool where the sisters pastured their cows.

On Saturday we were allowed to go to the shop to spend our pocket money. We would get a big bag of lollies for 6 pence.

Every year we would put on a concert. My sister and I both sang. We would also put on plays and four of us did an Irish jig that the nuns had taught us. We were accompanied by the school orchestra. I left school at fourteen and went home to help on the farm.

I liked to work outside helping father cut chaff and dip the sheep. My brother Mervyn taught me to milk the cows so that he could go to town for a long weekend. One day the cows got into a paddock with a dangerous bull. Not knowing any better I went into the paddock to get the cows. The bull did not bother me. My father yelled at me for being stupid. The bull could have killed me.

My sister Pat and I would go to the next farm to work. We would clean the house and make beds and look after the children, who were very spoilt. One day they wanted to pick mushrooms. We collected a big basket full. I cleaned and cooked them, gave them to the children who would not eat them.

When I was seventeen I saw a stranger walking down the hill to our house. He wore a leather jacket and a hat. He said he was a saddler looking for work, so I sent him to see father. Because it was the depression we could not afford to hire anybody. This gentleman, Syd Francis, noticed that the farms were overrun with rabbits so he decided to catch rabbits and sell them for food. Doing this he was able to make eight pounds a night.

Syd stayed in the area and became friends with all of us. He would play the accordion at the dances. My brother Mervyn and I would ride 15 miles on horseback to go to the dance. I would carry my dress and shoes in a bag and get changed in the schoolhouse.

After a while Syd leased a shop in Northampton. He mended shoes and leather goods. People could not afford to buy new saddles so he made a living this way.

My brother Mervyn gave me his old horse called Gay Lad. He was very cunning and I could not control him very well. He would gallop when I wanted him to walk and stop suddenly trying to throw me off. One day while Syd was riding home with me he suggested we change horses and he would try and make Gay Lad behave. His horse was one he was breaking in and training. He was much better behaved than my horse. Gay Lad behaved perfectly for Syd, he just didn't like being ridden by me.

When I was nineteen we left the farm as father was 72 years old and had enough of battling through hard times on the farm. We went to live in Geraldton. I got a job working in a boarding house. The landlady only rented back to bank workers and solicitors. I got paid 7 shillings sixpence a week.

One day she sent me to kill a turkey. I had never killed one before and I could not get it to stay on the chopping block. I swiped the axe at it and cut the carotid artery. Its head was still intact spurting blood all over me. I looked up and saw all the men from the building site nearby laughing at me.

There were 100 boys and 10 Brothers to wash and iron for. We had very limited facilities. The next job I took was at the Christian Brothers College doing laundry work. There was a washing machine, a copper and two irons. I got paid 17 shillings a week plus food and board. I stayed at this job for 2 years.

The war had been on for 2 years and there was an Australian airman base in Geraldton, most of the local men were in the army and were overseas fighting. We would go to the dances at Druid hall twice a week.

When I made my Debut I was too shy to ask a friend whom I danced with a lot, to be my partner, so the Bishop asked one of the airmen to partner me. He could not dance. My friend later told me he was disappointed I did not ask him.

I joined the Voluntary Aid detachment in 1940. I had to do 100 hours volunteer work before being eligible to join the A.A.M.W.S. The Australian Army Medical Women's Service. This training was done in Geraldton. Firstly a first

aid course, then working in the different hospitals to gain experience. I had completed my 100 hours when the Japanese entered the war. There was a ship load of AAMWS ready to leave but then the Defence Council would not let them leave Australia. Therefore there were too many girls in the AAMWS so I was put on reserve for 12 months. I finally joined the AAMWS on the 22nd December 1942. I joined as cook as the waiting list for nursing was too long. I was sent to the 118th army general hospital in Northam. My first night there coincided with the camp dance where I was introduced to the girls I was to work with.

We worked long hours and were paid six bob a day (approximately 60 cents). We were housed in tents. There were about 200 girls plus the sisters and matron living there. The men's camp was next to the women's camp and of a similar size.

We were only allowed to leave camp one night per week, but we went out every night except Monday as that was the staff dance and we all had to attend. Getting out was easy. There was a tree that the girls who wanted to ride into town waited at and the men from the men's army camp would pick you up and drop you back there at the tree afterward. As long as we were in before midnight no-one was the wiser. This way we were able to go to the dances in Northam. One night we were a bit late getting back and there was a hut search. We jumped into bed fully clothed and pretended to be asleep. The captain saw we were asleep and decided not to disturb us as we were the cooks and started work before everyone else.

One of the girls in our tent did not like us going out so she told the guard we were out without a pass and they were waiting for us when we got back. We got 10 days confined to barracks for that and had to report every half hour.

I stayed in Northam for ten months then was posted to Merredin to train with a South Australian unit. This hospital was under canvas (big tents). The weather was very humid. You had to hang your sheets on the line every morning or the flies would lay eggs on the cool sheets. Flies were into everything. The kitchen was a tent covered in fly wire.

One Sister liked to drink beer. She put it in the kitchen freezer to cool and forgot about them. The next morning when I went to work there was broken glass and frozen beer all over the freezer. I cleaned it up and threw it in the bin. When she came looking for her beer and could not find it, she accused me of stealing it. I yelled at her for the mess the beer had made. As she was an officer I got reported to the C.O for speaking out of turn. The C.O let me off without charge when I told him what had happened.

Six months later the unit was disbanded and I was sent to Hollywood hospital in Perth. I was only there six months when my parents became sick and as the only unmarried daughter I had to get a discharge to go home and look after them. This was on October 6th 1944.

Back in Geraldton I took a job as a laundress at the Saint John of God Hospital, washing the staff and patients.

I was engaged to be married in 1945 when the war ended. Syd came home from being a POW in Germany. I called off my wedding and married him instead.

Our wedding day was a disaster. We had to visit the bishop in Geraldton for Syd to sign some papers stating that any children would be brought up catholic (Syd was not catholic). He was not very impressed but signed anyway.

The wedding was at 3.30pm and there were 3 other weddings before ours. When I arrived at the church there were a lot of people outside, we thought the wedding before was running late so we drove around the block. Syd was waiting inside getting very agitated.

Because ours was a mixed religion marriage, the priest would not let the organist play the wedding march or let us walk down the centre isle in the cathedral. I took this as an insult as I had sung in the cathedral choir as it was my parish church.

Syd was insulted because the Italian wedding prior to ours had been given the full works and he had just spent 3 years as a prisoner of war held by the Italians and Germans. He never forgave the church for this insult. The photographer I hired sold his business and the new one was not working that weekend, so the only photos we had were the ones that the guests took.

At the wedding breakfast there was only half the food I had paid for. The caterer had sold the rest at a market stall. The pianist that was hired played so bad that my sister's sisters in-law played the bridal waltz for us. She then had to go and play at a Christmas dance so the whole wedding went too. After the dance my brother borrowed our car to take his family back to Northampton. That left us with no way to get back to Geraldton. We all piled on the back of a truck for the trip to Geraldton. Going up a hill the truck started to slip backwards so we had to get off. The truck broke down and we had to walk the rest of the way. I carried my 3 year old niece most of the way and we arrived as the sun was coming up. All my mother could say why haven't you been to mass.

We went to go on our honeymoon but the train drivers were on strike so we stayed at the railway hotel. When my brother bought the car back we drove to Northampton where Syd had furnished three rooms at the back of his saddlery shop.

After a while we sold the shop and went travelling around the stations up north mending saddles. Sometimes I would cook on the stations.

We later moved back to Northampton and bought Chilverton House where we lived for twenty years and had 6 children. 3 boys followed by 3 girls. I also had eight miscarriages, one before I had any children and seven between the second and third boy. A new doctor diagnosed that I had the Rhesus factor was causing me to miscarry. He gave me an injection and I carried the next four children successfully.

Syd did various jobs and businesses. He and his brother had a truck business and carted goods up and down the coast. Syd reopened his Sadleir shop at the back of Chilverton House. We also had a farm block called Gull Hill, near Red Bluff in Kalbarri on the coast. The land was very salty and did not grow much except wild flowers.

The 2 eldest boys went off the agricultural college, leaving four children at home. In 1968 we sold up and bought a caravan and went travelling around Australia with 4 of the children for 9 months. The children did correspondence school. We came back early because Terry wanted to join the Army and was underage at nineteen so we had to sign his permission papers. He was sent to Vietnam in 1969. We settled in Gosnells and bought a house in Swanley Street.

Syd's health had never been good since the war. He was treated for bad nerves and shell shock. In 1975 at the age of 64 a doctor finally found out why he had been blacking out for 30 years. He was found to have a heart valve that did not work, so that the blood had trouble reaching the lungs to be oxygenated making him pass out from lack of oxygen to the brain. He had open heart surgery and was fitted with a pig's heart valve, making him as good as new.

In 1988, on the day my youngest grandchild was born, I had brain surgery to remove a benign tumour. It was attached to the acoustic nerve and brain stem. When it was removed I was like a stroke victim. I had lost the sight in my left eye and the hearing in my left ear and the use of the muscles on the left side of my face. My arm and leg were also weakened and I had to spend 9 months in hospital learning to walk and talk properly. My balance was affected as well so when I came out of hospital I had to exercise each week. After a while I was able to attend the dances at the senior citizens again. The tumour regrew after a while and had to be removed again. This time my balance did not get better and now I walk with a walking stick.

On January 17 (my grandson David's 3rd birthday) Syd had a massive heart attack and died in his sleep. He was aged 81 years. We had been married for 45 years.