

Joan Kennedy

I emigrated to Australia from England in 1925. I was one year old, and the youngest of eight children who came out with our parents. Lily, our oldest sister, stayed behind as she was married and had two children.

We sailed out on a ship called "Diogenes", a voyage which took seven weeks. We nearly sank on the way, as we hit a storm and the cargo shifted, threatening to turn the ship over. Everyone who could help went below and moved the cargo back into place. I was told later that it had been a very frightening experience, but eventually we arrived safely in Albany and were transported to Denmark by train. We took up land at Group Settlement no 58, at 111 Scotsdale Road, Denmark.

My father had had his own business in England, but he and my mother had come to Australia in the hope of a better life for the family, in a land reported to be flowing with milk and honey. Their first impression of their new home must have been devastating. The Group Settlement house was a weatherboard and corrugated iron shack with a verandah at the front. When we moved in, it was unlined and consisted of one big room. Later, this was divided up into rooms by the help of Hessian bags, but at first the whole family had to live in this one room, set on about 100 acres of virgin bush.

We were provided with dingo traps, as the dingoes were particularly numerous in those days, and would come howling right up to the house at night, which was very frightening, especially for the younger ones. We were also given a cow and a horse, axes and picks. My parents and older brothers worked hard to clean up around the shack, plant vegetables and do the best they could to provide for the family, but life was hard for all of us, especially no doubt, my mother who had another daughter, Joy, while we lived there. Eventually, after years of trying to make a go of things, they decided to move into Albany.

At first, they rented a house in Collie Street, opposite the fire station and my father went back to his proper trade of Master Farrier. There was a massive big yard behind the house and my father started up a business, shoeing horses. This was the beginning of a happy time for all of us, living in a proper house with decent facilities, shops nearby, and the family all together. My mother was a lovely person, with a placid happy disposition and my father was a good man with many interests. He started the first pigeon club in Albany and won many trophies. I remember the clock he made, which could be stopped the moment the pigeons returned, so that their times could be checked.

As time went on, we moved to a house in Festing Street. My brothers left school one by one and Joe and Johnny worked on the ships as lumpers. George got a job working on the roads and Bobby became a cook in the Freemason's Hotel.

In 1933, quite suddenly, life changed. My father was kicked in the stomach by a horse, developed cancer, and died. I was ten years old. Six months later, my mother died too.

Our house had a lot of steps leading up to it and one day my mother slipped on these steps and fell. She never walked again. My sister Rene took her in a wheel

chair by train to Perth to attend the hospital. They stayed in a boarding house and Rene wheeled her back and forth to the hospital everyday. One day, on their way back, mother was slumped in the wheel chair when they reached the boarding house and the landlady told Rene that mother was dead. We couldn't afford to bring her back to Albany for the funeral and so she was buried in Perth.

My oldest brother Joe wanted to put Joy and me into a home, but brother Johnny - a lovely man – said no, the family must stay together. Ivy, our oldest sister, took over the running of the house until she got married and moved out and then each sister in turn, Ivy, Vi and Rene looked after those of us who were left. Rene married and moved out when I was thirteen years old. I had to leave school and clean the house and cook for my brothers and younger sister Joy. By that time we had moved to Parade Street, in a pretty little house next to the park there, but it was hard work for a young girl like me.

When I was fifteen years old, I started work at the Woolen Mills. Joy went to live with Rene, and the family split up. I was on my own.

A girl called Eileen, who worked with me at the mill, became my friend and we decided to take a room together and share the expenses. For the enormous sum of thirty shillings a week, we found a room in Frederick Street with a Mrs Worthington. It was an upstairs room with two beds, a couple of chairs and some other bits of furniture and we had the use of the kitchen so that we could make our own meals. We felt very grown-up and independent.

This was in 1939 and when World War 2 broke out, the employees at the Woolen Mills were man-powered – in other words, none of us was allowed to leave because the work we did was vital to the war effort. We made materials and blankets for the Armed Forces.

We worked from 7.30am until 7.30pm from Mondays to Fridays and then from 7.30am to 1pm on Saturdays. The work was hard and we were generally very tired by the time we walked back to our little room. There were no streetlights of course, because of the war. We didn't have a black-out, as they did in England, but we had a "brown out", with blankets placed over windows to make sure that no light shone out, and wardens patrolling to make sure that everything was as it should be. Luckily Eileen and I didn't have far to walk and in those days, there was nothing to fear by being out at night in the dark. People were friendly and helpful and we always felt perfectly safe.

Even though we were tired, we cooked ourselves a proper meal before flopping down on our beds. We managed to have some fun on Sundays too. When we lived in Parade Street, I used to play cricket on the oval there in the ladies team. Also, when I was twelve and thirteen, I used to climb up the mountain nearby, with my friends and we would make secret little "puzzies". We had lovely times, scrambling about in the fresh air, exploring and just enjoying being alive. Even after I started work, these Sundays of fun continued. Sometimes a friend would lend me a bike and we would cycle along Golf Links Road to a place called Shelley's Beach, a sort of swampy place where Boronia grew. We would pick some of this overpoweringly sweet-scented flower to take back to our room. Sometimes, I would visit other friends and we would chatter away and giggle as young girls do.

At work however, life was hard. The floors were made of cement, which meant that our feet got very cold in winter and the work itself was tedious. When I began, I was put to work on the spinning machines. There were two of these, big and long and my job was to walk round and round these machines all day, joining any threads that broke. Later, I was put on the twisting machines and then on the winding machines. These were big silver drums, which spun very fast and if the thread broke, we had to stop the machine with our hands. I was always a bit frightened of these spinning drums and sometimes got behind in my work.

The only break we had was half an hour for lunch. Women worked on these day shifts and when we left at 7.30pm, men took over our machines and worked through the night. When I was eighteen years old, the man who took over from me was called Theo. He was very kind to me. He would catch up if I was behind with my work and always had a chat with me when we changed shifts. He was a shy man, and not one for the girls, and I was shy too, but gradually we became fond of each other.

Theo, lived with his parents in a rented house on the foreshore where Millers timber yards are now. There was a verandah at the back and Theo, who knew that I was on my own offered to close it in for me, making a little room where I could live and be near him and his family. He was good with his hands and soon, I went to live in this dear little room where I felt safe, and as if I had a family of my own again. Theo's mother looked after me, as if I were her own daughter and I loved her.

At the weekends, Theo and I would go sailing on his little sixteen-foot yacht at Bramble Beach. Those were happy days in spite of the shortages due to the war. Make-up was expensive and hard to get, but I generally managed to get a lipstick and powder, which I put on with a fluffy powder puff. Theo never told me that I looked pretty, but I knew he liked me very much and I thought he was wonderful. We got married in 1945, the year the war ended. That's when I left the Woolen Mills and started married life.