
Peggy Erestine Thorn (nee Readhead)

I grew up on a farm in North Dandalup, the youngest of three daughters. My sisters and I rode horses or walked the 3kms to school. I left school in 1936 when I turned 13, as my father wanted me to help him on the farm and my primary school teacher, a returned serviceman from WWI, was unable to help me with the secondary level correspondence course I had just started.

I milked up to 50 dairy cows twice a day, reared the pigs, geese and chickens and helped with the clearing and fencing of the land. The milking was done by hand until I was about 15, when to my great excitement we got a milking machine! My father had not done any farming in Australia before he was married, and he learnt how to manage Australian conditions by trial and error. It was very different to his fathers' farm in England where he grew up. Of course there was no electricity on our farm with ploughing done by our three plough horses.

Fires were common in summer, often started by the steam trains, which went past our property. Each night someone had to be up on "fire watch" to call the alarm in case of sparks flying in the strong easterly winds. We were frequently all up in the middle of the night with green bushes and bags to put out fires, then up again early next morning to milk the cows.

I was 17 when war broke out and our hearts went out to our relatives in England. At first we seemed so far away in Australia, but the increasing devastation in Europe soon meant it concerned us too. At that stage my father still frequently supplemented our income with part time work so my sister and I were manpowered onto the farm. I wanted to join up as I had always set my mind on being a nurse, but my application was refused, as I had to stay on the farm.

So all through the war years I did general farm work, milking the cows, feeding the calves, pigs and poultry. We also ran sheep and that was a lot of extra work at shearing and lambing times. The farm was gradually being cleared so I also did a lot of the heavy work helping my father with cutting down trees with a crosscut saw or using a tree puller as well as putting in the new fencing.

My mother was the local secretary of the CWA (Country Women's Association) having established the local group some years earlier. During the war years the CWA members spent all their spare time donating materials and making up care packages for the troops. The parcels included home knitted socks, fruitcake, tinned food and lollies. We often put little personal notes in the toes of the socks and occasionally we would get letters back thanking us. We also received letters from England telling us how short of food they were so we sent fruitcake, lump sugar, dried fruit and anything else that would keep.

Our only entertainment was the dance held in the North Dandalup Hall. All soldiers were invited and people would come from everywhere so it was always crowded. We had 4 piece bands playing and provided special suppers with tea and a chicory coffee mix made with fresh milk, which everyone enjoyed.

We always made quite a lot of money to contribute towards the Red Cross. On some weekends people from Perth came to North Dandalup by train to walk to the waterfalls up the Darling Scarp near where the North Dandalup Dam now is.

The CWA provided lunches of pies, sandwiches and sausage rolls etc. Again the proceeds all went to the Red Cross.

We were all on rationing coupons for petrol, tea, sugar, butter, meat, linen and other household items. Our cars had black hoods over headlights, so it was very hard to see the road and we could not drive very fast at nighttime.

When I married in 1943 I had a terrible time getting enough coupons to purchase a wedding dress and any new clothes for a trousseau or to buy the household linen and other things we would need to set up a new house. Luckily, being on the farm, we were able to swap butter and meat coupons with friends and relatives who were always short of those, for the clothing and linen coupons they did not need as much.

As my other sister who also was still on the farm was married in 1943, only one month later, our father had to sell all his dairy cattle and equipment to swap for sheep and beef cattle. Dairy farming is much more labour intensive and he could not manage without us.

My new husband and I drove to Bunbury for our honeymoon, using up more precious petrol coupons. There we were able to buy 2 dinner plates, 2 cups and saucers and 2 each of each cutlery item we needed. They were all in very short supply so we thought we were very lucky to get that much. We were very glad of the break from our heavy workloads, especially as my husband Don, had been extraordinarily flat out making cement bricks for our house which was being built as an extra activity in between milking cows each morning and evening and everything else that had to be done on the farm.

Lime was in short supply so I took my husband in the old Ford truck to a place where I'd been on my horse and knew there was plenty of lime capstone. It was some miles away through the bush with no tracks so it was a very rough trip. We loaded up and returned home where Don burnt it in a big pit that he had dug. He piled wood over it, burnt it and sieved it all to make lime mortar.

Don was a Sergeant in the Home Guard (Volunteer Defence Corps) so was away most of the weekend training his men. He was also secretary of the Red Cross, so we put a lot of effort into fundraising. When we held the dances in the hall I would get busy that day and make meat pies, which we sold to support the Red Cross. They were so very popular I could never make enough, but I never told the customers they were made of half beef and half kangaroo mince. I also used to sell them at half time whenever we had a picture show at the hall with the proceeds all going to the Red Cross.

When the war ended we held a great celebration in the local hall with great jubilation all around. We danced until the small hours in the morning so it was very hard to get up to do the milking at dawn on the next day!

My first two children were born during the war in 1944 and 1945, and my third child in 1949. By then we had sold the dairy herd and found it much easier to maintain a mixed farm of sheep and beef cattle, requiring us to my more land. Each time we needed to muster the cattle we would ride the horses the 4kms from the house to the newer block before riding to find and round up all the cattle

and then riding back again. This would take the full day from an early morning breakfast through to exhaustedly cooking a late evening meal. Don and I were both involved in the local P&C and sporting clubs in our younger days. I still play competitive bowls now at 81 years old.

We retired from the farm in 1973 to allow our son to manage the farm. He had always rounded up the cattle on motorbikes these days and there are no longer any horses on the farm. Don has never really retired. Living in Mandurah, he has always been much sought after as a general "Mr Fix it" as he can always turn his hand to anything and solve any DIY problems around any home. We are always surprised at how few people have learnt how to manage to live happily and contentedly without relying upon expensive solutions to all their needs.