

Reminiscences of Gwenyth Patricia Swan, née Pollack, 1986

From “Who are the Pollacks?” (Jo and Allen Brown, editors, Aug 1986, privately published, pp71–76)

This book is subtitled “The Phyl Brown Octenary Celebration Booklet”, and was produced to celebrate the 80th birthday of Phyllis Marjorie Pollack, the eldest of seven children of Alfred John Pollack and Janet Laura, née Watson. Gwenyth Patricia Pollack (1916–2003) was their youngest child.

GWENYTH PATRICIA POLLACK SWAN

On the occasion of Phyllis Marjorie’s 80th birthday, I put pen to paper to record some of my memories of the Pollack saga. Although Phyl was No 1 and I am No 7 of the “Seven Little Australians”, there are only 9 years and 7 months between us, so our parents were busy.

We got the tag when we went to a fancy dress ball as a set, with “Seven Little Australians” on a banner. It was simple to do, as we wore our usual clothes. I remember the prize was a Collins Clear Type dictionary each. Very cheap copies with red linen-type covers, which left a red stain over everything when wet. As I was about 3 and couldn’t read, it wasn’t the best prize for me, but I carted it around for ages, getting covered in red dye.

I don’t know how the line of demarcation evolved as we were equally spaced, but Jack, Jean and I were always referred to as “the children”.

As no 7, I was born on 17 March 1916, St Patrick’s Day and 2 years into World War 1. I was dubbed Patricia as a second name in honour of the day. I was born at old Nurse Grant’s nursing home in South Grafton.

Grafton seemed a good place to live in to me as a kid. We lived across the road from the river, and spent lots of time swimming from the water brigade building, hanging on to the punt flap back and forth, and suffering a lot from earache from the river mud we stirred up.

Living across the road from Dr Earle Page’s “Clarence House” hospital, we were friends with the local doctors. I remember Dr Maxwell always treated my earache with hot salt bags and he told me lots of Brer Fox stories.

I often put on a bad cough to have a poultice on my chest. It was lots of fun making things out of the plasticine-like stuff in the morning.

Our bowling green at home was very popular with us and the neighbours for games. It was lit at night, and was great in Grafton’s heat for kids’-type games and tortoise races. (They lived in the wooden gutter around the green.)

We spent a lot of time dressing up and having concerts and mock weddings on the green. Dad had a top hat which was much used. I believe the billiard room was added to the house about the time Jack was born. Most entertainment was at home. Dad had his bowls and billiards and his friends all came to our house to play. Mother had croquet and mah jong parties. Later Colin laid an antbed tennis court, and we had tennis parties. I remember going out lots of times and collecting antbeds in our big Hudson car.

Mother had her “at home” day on the first Monday of the month, when all her friends received a printed card: “Mrs Pollack will be at home Monday”. That way her entertainment obligations were covered.

We also had dances at the house, especially after the sleepout was built, which had a good floor after the beds were removed. Music came from the old wind-up gramophone.

Sunday nights, Mother played hymns and we sang from Sankey's hymn book. Mother had a fine voice which none of us, especially me, inherited.

The first holiday I remember was at a boarding house at Ebor. I remember the big hats we wore with fly nets for our bush walks.

After that I remember one at Iluka when I was lost in the sandhills. I told those who found me my name was "Genny tissue paper". I couldn't say *Patricia* and used to say *Tissa* which the others dubbed tissue paper.

After that we rented a house at Woolgoolga a few times; once it was the school house and we played school "our rules" for most of the holidays.

Colin always seemed to have pockets left full of beach worms which Mum was always tossing out.

Finally Dad bought "Woopi House". affectionately dubbed "Pollacks' Palace", and all my holiday memories are of Woopi and our doings from the house after that¹. It was a real expedition to get there from Grafton, and never attempted for short stays². It was really only a bullock track and was thick clay after rain, needing a bullock wagon if one became bogged. We had to use chains on the tyres. We'd have a hot meal at Mrs Tuckey's at Halfway Creek.

Until we got our first car, a green Essex, we came by hired car. We had the minimum of luggage as with such a crowd of us there wasn't much room. Suitcases were strapped to the running board. When I see what comes to Woopi these days for a holiday, I wonder how they would manage without what they now consider essentials. Mum made us walk around the worst part of the mountain range in case she lost us all at once.

I remember how Mum and Dad went for walks up the headland with Jean and me trailing behind singing "every little wave had its night cap on".

Dad used to take off for Hearn's Lake to fish for garfish with a bamboo pole and dough, and a detective story to read. I think he went to get some peace and read, and was glad if the fish didn't bite. He used to love sarsparilla leaves, and used to hunt for them in the bush. We had a cow for the holidays, as there was no milk delivery. We also had the use of an old sway-back horse called Freda, whom we rode bareback 3 at a time.

Dad was a happy, friendly man with a lovely smile. We used to have a buttonhole red rose bush (I haven't seen one anywhere else) in the front garden at Sth Grafton. Jean and I took it in turns to walk Dad to the gate on his way to work and pick a rose for his buttonhole, which he always wore.

¹ The house at 13 Carrington St, Woolgoolga, purchased on 5 Sep 1924, is shown in Neil Yeates' *Woolgoolga: History of a Village*, 3rd edition, 1994 (and special edition, 2013), p152. The purchase (Old Form Torrens Register 1236-134) was from Herbert Arthur Evans (Bellingen surveyor) and William Frederick Blood (Grafton storekeeper) not from the Church of England, as stated by Yeates, but those vendors had acquired the property by transmission the previous year from Bishop Druitt of Grafton, who had acquired it in 1918. Prior owners of the land were George Buckland, Police Constable of Woolgoolga, 20 Nov 1897 to 1915, and Richmond Dobie Bawden, Grafton solicitor, 1915-1918. In 1924, AJ Pollack had previously purchased three adjoining lots a block further up the headland: Lot 11, bounded by Arthur and Queen Streets and Cassia Lane, from Amy Hilda Bawden, 3 Jan 1924 (Old Form Torrens Register 1145-229); and Lots 12 & 13 up the hill to its east, from Annie Emma Kite, on 28 May 1924 (Old Form Torrens Register 2002-94 & 95). All 4 properties went to Phyllis and a solicitor on AJP's death. Viola's husband Clive Miller owned Lot 12 from 1932 until 1946.

13 Carrington Street, part of the Sep 1924 purchase, was still owned by the daughter of Phyllis, Merilyn Flick, in 2018.

² A photo on p153 of Yeates (ibid.) shows the Pollack family about to set off from Grafton to Woolgoolga in their car in the 1920s.

Summertime in Grafton he wore cream tussore silk suits and always a hat. No gentleman went without a hat, which was always raised to ladies.

I remember going with him to the south polling booth when he went up for parliament. He gave me Country Party ribbons to pin on all the old men. I guess he thought a little girl might charm them. We all sat under the board watching the returns as they came in to Grafton, and celebrated when Dad won the seat.

Other occasions I remember with him were the opening of the Nymboida Hydro-Electric Scheme and the driving of the first pylon of the Clarence bridge, both of which we worked for.

I never remember him losing his temper with us. The most he ever came out with was “none of your shenanigans!”.

We only had a chip bath heater and one of my jobs was to collect small sticks after school to fire it.

Saturday mornings, Mum always fine-combed our hair on to a pillow on her lap as we knelt in front of her. I don't recall if she found anything, but lots of kids were sent home from school for kerosene treatment. After that we were dosed with syrup of figs, just in case we needed a clean-out.

Mum had trouble with veins in her legs and used to go to Moree to “take the waters”. During this time we would have a housekeeper and had to write Mum daily letters. She kept a lot, and I read some years later that were gems. Colin always reported terrible illnesses and accidents to his person. Dad vetted the letters, and there were notes on Col's letters, assuring her of his perfect health. Mavis always reported the latest love affairs of the neighbours, and any scandal she'd gleaned, such as Miss Ainsworth using flour on her face and insisting it was her natural skin.

Mum's youngest brother, Ossie Watson, and wife Rene often stayed with us during leave from the Malay States, where Os was Government Surveyor. He used to save up leave for 2 years, and have a long spell. They always brought us a suitcase of Chinese slippers and such. They taught us lots of songs and entertained. Rene had been a Cheerio Girl during the war, entertaining the troops. They did “Little Mr Baggy Britches” together and taught it to Jean and me; we had the costumes and performed it in school concerts.

Dad's cousin, Jack Marsden, was another favourite. He had lots of stories and was more like Dad than his brother.

To my knowledge Mother hadn't been ill, but one day when I was 9½ years old, I was called from a neighbour's to see her as she had to go into hospital for surgery. She didn't recover, and died at 46. The day of the funeral, Dad came into the room I shared with Jean; I can still see him, standing in front of a mirror, with an arm around each of us saying “my two little girls have to be brave and grow up now”.

Life went on for a few more years in Grafton, with Phyl and Mave taking turns to be Mum and the other keeping house in Dad's flat in Sydney. Phyl had always made our dresses and still did, making our one new dress each year, new for the show.

When I was 12 we left Grafton for Sydney, first living in Mosman, then Cremorne. I went to North Sydney High. Money was very tight, as it was the depression, and we had rent to pay. Dad had a lot of worry financially and in Parliament and worked too hard.

At 52 he had a big heart attack during his sleep and died. We had to go back to Grafton to wind things up; with the old house sold, we had to rent again.

Mavis was the first to leave the seven, and married Ron³. I was 14 and going for my Intermediate. After Phyl married Jim⁴, I had left school and kept house for a while and eventually went to Sydney to help Mavis with Jan and Rob.

It was from there I took up nursing and endured 4 years hard labour at Sydney Hospital under middle-aged menopausal sisters who had been there forever; combined with Matron they did their best to break me. I stuck it because I was lucky to have a job at all. Matron assured me I would never be the nurse my great-aunt was. It wasn't until I'd become more popular that she told me of the great-aunt, Alice Pollack, who later became Mrs King⁵.

It appears Florrie Nightingale was informed of the disgusting conditions in our one and only hospital – the Rum Hospital as Sydney Hospital was called because the patients exchanged their weekly ration of flour and salt pork (which they had to prepare themselves) with the locals for rum, so were always drunk until they passed on.

Florrie picked out so many free settler women and convict girls to form the first trained nurses in NSW. They were kept in order with the “cat o’ nine tails” which still hangs in the board room of the hospital. One of the free settlers was the said aunt, who had herself eventually trained Matron.

Matron also used to inform me that she didn't run an orphan asylum and didn't have to keep me. However I was grateful for her good training, some of which rubbed off and stood me in good stead.

World War 2 broke out in my third year there. After I left Sydney Hospital I went to Tresillian for child welfare, and when I was 24 (age required for nursing service) I joined the army and spent some time in Queensland, the war in Europe being then over.

After the war I did my obstetrics, actually topping my year at King George V Hospital. I took various jobs, moving on for variety. From Casino Hospital I went to Hopewood Infants Home at Bowral for a couple of years. From there it was to Campbell Town, Tas: Hopetoun, Vic; Woodville, SA; Belhaven Infants, Bellevue Hill, and Coffs Harbour Hospital.

From Coffs I teamed up with Sue Malcolm and went to England where we worked at the London Clinic in Harley Street. We nursed all the elite there – members of the royal families of England and the continent, Arabian sheiks, film stars etc. We also did a stint in Scotland. Sadly my back gave up and I had to go back to the clinic for surgery. This restricted my nursing from there on, and I took less physical jobs.

After we returned to Sydney I went to Warragamba in charge of the medical centre, treating the workers building the dam. Whilst there I met and married Bill Swan, who was in charge of the heavy equipment there. He had been a widower for some years, and had one son Jim, who was grown up and later married Nan⁶. They had 3 children Tony, Celia and Kevin. They are all married now, and Celia has 2 sons, and Tony a daughter, making me a step-great-grandma.

Bill was quite a bit older than I, so I decided against a family of my own. We were good mates and enjoyed golf, dancing, camping and fishing. I continued nursing, going into the baby health centres. Bill retired in 1965, and we went to live at Pt Clare where we'd been working on building a home. Sadly Bill

³ Ronald Alexander Denovan; married 17 Feb 1931 Gwen's sister Laura Mavis Pollack

⁴ James Thompson Brown; married 16 Sep 1933 Gwen's sister Phyllis Marjorie Pollack

⁵ Alice King née Pollack (1858–1947) was Gwen's great aunt, a sister of her paternal grandfather Samuel Francis Pollack

⁶ William George Swan married Gwen on the last day of 1953 at Penrith. He was a widower, having married Delia Paxton 26 Dec 1921 at Bombala. [Delia 1901–1950].

developed stomach cancer, and died in 1969⁷. I found the house and garden beyond me, so came up to Woopi where I found and bought the present unit where I live. I still garden and enjoy the beach. Jim Swan now lives close by at Mullaway, and I have his family for interest, and see a lot of the family at old Woopi house and Vi's beach house.

I think I've had a full life, and made the most of situations.

I think the modern small families, homes restricted to a small block, and the pace of modern living make life hard for present-day kids.

They seem to have to cope with broken marriages, expectations of excelling in school and sport, not to mention the drug scene.

I'm glad I was young when I was and I think I was fortunate to be one of the seven little Australians, and to have a big sister Phyllis M.

Address: 5/33 Ocean St, Woolgoolga 2450

[Booklet privately published, August 1986]

⁷ William died 14 Feb 1968, not 1969. The place of registration was Gosford; NSW Deaths Register 16196/1968. Point Clare adjoins Gosford.