

Memories of Oatley by John Coltman 2023

I was born on the 14th of November 1933, @ the Pacific Private Hospital, Queen St; Brighton le Sands, on my Father's 39th Birthday. He said he never had another birthday after that! My parents were Everet Graydon & Beatrice Levena Levy Coltman, nee Taylor. They lived with Dad's Mother, Emily & his Spinster sister, Clytie, at 2 Market St: Rockdale.

Victor

George Gillett was an engineer. His wife was Elizabeth Polley. Elizabeth and Mum shared a dislike of tomatoes. George and Elizabeth were married in 1889 and had three children born at Redfern, Francis George (1892), known as George, Gladys E. (1894) and Victor Robert (1897) after Elizabeth's father, Robert Gillett.

Gladys died of rheumatic fever at Redfern in 1906 aged 12. Suffering the same illness, Vic was left with rheumatic heart disease.

The family called their new house in Samuel St, St Peters, 'Gladysville'. When they moved from Redfern to St Peters, they found the wide open spaces uncomfortable. Nanny and Vic met because they lived in adjoining streets. Millie Jessop, another neighbour at St Peters, had a rheumatic heart that was said to be worse than Vic's yet she lived into her nineties. It was Millie who brought up the baby when her sister died in childbirth.

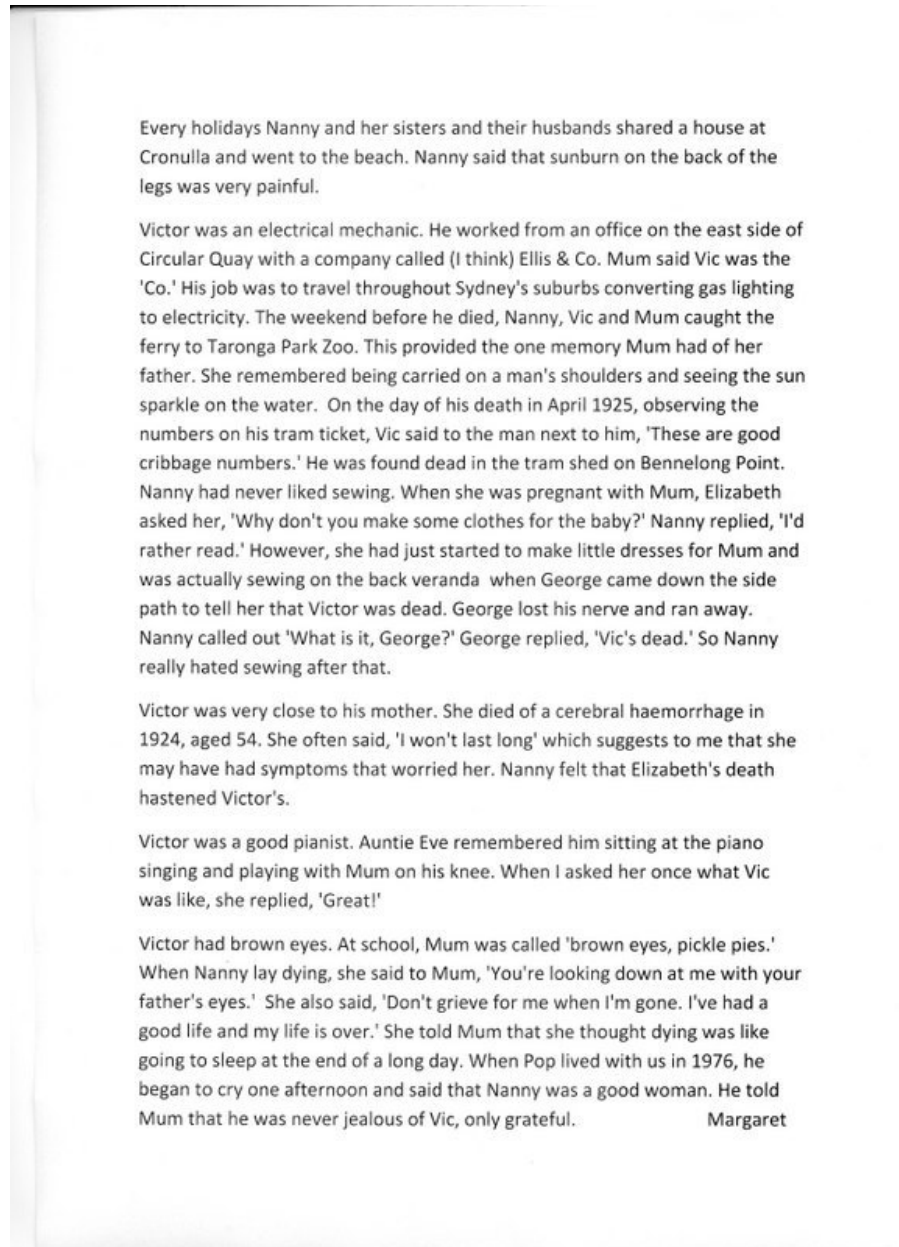
Nanny and her sisters weren't allowed to go out with their boyfriends until their chores were done. Nanny and Vic also worked a half day Saturday. After work they would say 'Where shall we go?' But they always decided to take the ferry to Manly.

They couldn't have had many opportunities for privacy because later on when Mum and Dad used to tell Nanny and Pop to go to bed so that they could have the lounge room to themselves, Nanny said, 'You're lucky. All we had was the gas box.' This makes me wonder what a gas box looked like and how you could have a cuddle on it.

Nanny and Vic were criticised for wanting to get married because Vic had a weak heart. However, they did and when Vic discovered that the only desert Nanny could cook was jam tart, he went home and got his mother's recipe for lemon meringue pie. When Nanny became pregnant she was a bit irritated with Mum for coming so soon. Mum was born at Bexley. Later Nanny and Vic moved back to 'Gladysville' where Vic's parents (or maybe just his father) still lived in order to save money for the block of land that eventually became 78 Letitia St Oatley.

Both Mum & Dad had been married previously, about 10 years before they married on 16th April 1931. Dad's first wife, Belle, & their baby died at birth on 23/12/ 1923, at the Women's Hospital, Sydney. The sex of the baby is unknown. They are both buried in an unmarked grave at Rookwood Cemetery. Mum married Victor Gillett

in 1921. They had a daughter June on 16th February 1923. Vic died of a heart attack in 1925, when June was only 2. Victor suffered from Rheumatic Fever as a child, and this left him with heart valve problems. He left Mum to go to work & was found dead on the tram in the sheds at Bennelong Point, where the Opera



House is today. Beat & June stayed at Victor's parents' home in Tempe for some time after he died. When Vic's Father started to take an interest in Beat she moved in with her parents, Lewis & Florence Taylor, at 35 Lymerston St; Tempe, which was only a couple of streets from the Gillett home.

In 1933/4, my parents built a 2-bedroom brick home @ 78 Letitia St; Oatley. Mum had bought the quarter acre block with Vic when they were first married. One of Mum's sisters, Lillian & her

husband Walter Grundy, with their 2 children Cliff & Betty lived next door at number 80. Her only brother, Harry Taylor & his wife Olga, with their 4 children, John, Barry, Lindsay & daughter Carmen, lived at number 82. Carmen was about 3 years younger than me, the boys all older. Because I was younger than my 4 male

cousins & there was already a John, I was nicknamed, little John. In my early years, Carmen & I were good mates & played a lot together. There was a huge bougainvillea in their back yard & we used to climb & play in it.

I don't remember a lot about my pre school years. A couple of things I do remember, one was catching bees. My Dad was a keen gardener & grew most of our vegetables. He also grew poppies, which attracted the bees . I would get an



empty match box & half open it. Then I would sneak up on the bee inside the flower, put the open part of the box over it & quickly snap the box shut. This was quite a tricky procedure, and it was not unusual for me to get bitten. My Mum told me I used to carry a blue bag in my left hand & when I was bitten, I would quickly apply the bag after first pulling out the sting. I was not deterred by being stung. I can't remember what I did with the bees, probably let them go. It was the thrill of the catch. I need to explain what a blue bag was & whether it was effective: In the 1930's, there were no washing machines. We had a gas fired copper which the soap & clothes were put into

& the water brought to the boil. Mum had a special stick which she used to stir the clothes. When the clothes were considered washed. They were transferred into a tub of clean water, via a manual wringer, to rinse them; they then went to another tub for a second rinse & in this tub was a Reckitt's Blue Bag. The Blue Bag, which contained synthetic ultramarine & sodium bicarbonate, absorbed any

yellow & the clothes came out gleaming white. There were no coloureds in those days. The Blue bag was also very effective on bee stings.

I was a free spirit from a very early age and tended to wander off and explore the surrounding area. To prevent me from wandering, Dad had a 6" high lattice fences built on both sides of the house. This only presented me with a challenge as I was an excellent climber from a very young age. I can, after all these years , remember being caught red handed trying to escape & get the wrong end of the feather duster for my trouble. I was then known to go around the other side of the house, tears streaming down my face, & climb over the lattice there.

Another memory is when the Council were doing the kerb & guttering. I used to sit out the front and watch the workmen. I couldn't have been very old as I was still in a highchair & the story goes that at dinner time, I looked back at the big clock on the mantle piece, spat over the side of my chair, & said, " this bloody clock's running slow!"

My years up to starting school, were very carefree. The only time I wore shoes was when mum took me into Town to go shopping. As I hated shopping, I would sometimes hide one shoe in the hope Mum couldn't find it we wouldn't have to go. If Mum got really frazzled, I would feel sorry for her and produce the missing shoe. Sometimes she would tell Dad, when he came home from work, how naughty I had been & I would be marched off to the laundry for the feather duster dance.

Every May we would go to Nambucca Heads for 2 weeks holiday. Dad worked for the Railways in a clerical position. His Office was in the Darling Harbour Goods Yard. Consequently, he would get a free pass to travel first Class. I loved going on the steam train. It left about 8.00pm & arrived at Nambucca early the next morning. You could open the windows but had to be careful in case you got soot in your eyes. As we got closer to our destination & it became light, people would be standing along the railway track, calling out, papers, papers. Newspapers were delivered to Country areas by train & it could take a few days for the news to arrive. If they were able to get yesterdays paper. it was a bonus, plus saving the cost.

When the train arrived at Nambucca Heads railway station, there were fisherman on the platform with boxes of fish bound for the Sydney fish markets. The fish were packed with ice and covered with bracken ferns. No refrigeration then, so the fish had to get to Sydney as soon as possible after being caught. I always enjoyed our holidays at Nambucca.

The house we rented, Sunny Side, was quite Spartan, only a wood fired stove in the kitchen. I had to have a bath in the kitchen in a metal tub. Dad caught lots of fish, so that's what we ate for most meals. I don't think Mum really enjoyed the fishing holidays. No comforts of home & fish to cook 2/3 times a day.

I was born towards the end of the great depression & money was very tight. Many people were out of work & there was no Government assistance. Luckily, dad's job at the NSWGR was protected, so he was never out of work. He didn't earn a lot of money but was enough for us to live reasonably well. His annual salary in 1933 was 300 pounds.

Form 1: 14 April 1913 - 16 Dec 1941

DATE	POSITION	STATION	BRANCH	RATE OF PAY	REMARKS
14 April 1913	Junior Clerk	Railway Station	Traffic Dept	£75	
14 Nov 1913	"	"	"	£70	
14 Nov 1915	Clerk	"	"	£80	
14 Nov 1917	"	"	"	£85	
14 Nov 1919	"	"	"	£90	
14 Nov 1921	"	"	"	£100	
14 Nov 1923	"	"	"	£110	
14 Nov 1925	"	"	"	£120	
14 Nov 1927	"	"	"	£130	
14 Nov 1929	"	"	"	£140	
14 Nov 1931	"	"	"	£150	
14 Nov 1933	"	"	"	£160	
14 Nov 1935	"	"	"	£170	
14 Nov 1937	"	"	"	£180	
14 Nov 1939	"	"	"	£190	
14 Nov 1941	"	"	"	£200	
16 Dec 1941	"	"	"	£208	

Form 2: 2 May 1920 - 13 May 1947

DATE	POSITION	STATION	BRANCH	RATE OF PAY	REMARKS
2 May 1920	6th Clerk	Waggon	Traffic Dept	£180	
2 May 1922	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1924	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1926	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1928	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1930	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1932	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1934	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1936	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1938	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1940	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1942	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1944	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1946	"	"	"	£180	
2 May 1947	"	"	"	£180	

My Mum was very loving & caring & Dad used to spend time with me at weekends. I was well clothed & we had plenty of good food. You don't realise how poor you were until you look back later in life.

I was never a big fan of school, although my first year in Kindergarten, 1939, was good. My teacher was Miss Rogers. She lived in Rosa St & I would often see her around Oatley. She was young, pretty & kind. First class was a shock, Mrs Lindsell was our teacher, the opposite of Miss Rogers, not young or pretty & shouted. I think she put

me off school for good. Second & Third classes where OK & I made a lot of friends. Peter Chiswell, whose Father & 2 Brothers, owned Chiswell Furniture. Peter lived in Rosa St, behind our house in Letitia St. We played a lot together. He had a Hornby train set & I used to love going to his place and playing with it. Peter went on to become Anglican Bishop of Armidale. Another good friend was Brian (Mick) Carson. Brian lived in Annette St; & their block went down to Oatley Bay, where his parents had a Halverson Cruiser moored. We would from time-to-time row out to the launch & read comics. Mick's Father was a Sergeant of Police., Peter Standen lived next door to the Carson's & we were close friends until he married. I was Groomsman at his wedding 1955.

My Father was always a very nervous person & suffered from depression. Walking to the station he would often have to stop and rest for a while. It must have been during 2nd or 3rd class; he had a nervous breakdown & we went to live at Forster on the mid North Coast for 3 months while he recuperated. I loved that time as I excelled at school & was able to go fishing after school. I can remember catching some big striped blackfish off a wharf near the town.

Another memory of that period was a horse called Mandrake. I think he was owned by a Mr Tooley who was a Real Estate Agent with LJ Hooker. As the name suggests, Mandrake was a very clever horse. He had a habit of escaping from his yard & then walking through the town opening garden gates & having a feed in peoples gardens.

Every morning at Oatley School we would get a milk delivery & each child received a small bottle of milk with an aluminium lid. Some of us boys would put a pin hole in the lid & after sucking some milk out, then suck all the air out of the bottle. The milk would then come out in a stream which could be directed into your open mouth.(or at someone else!)

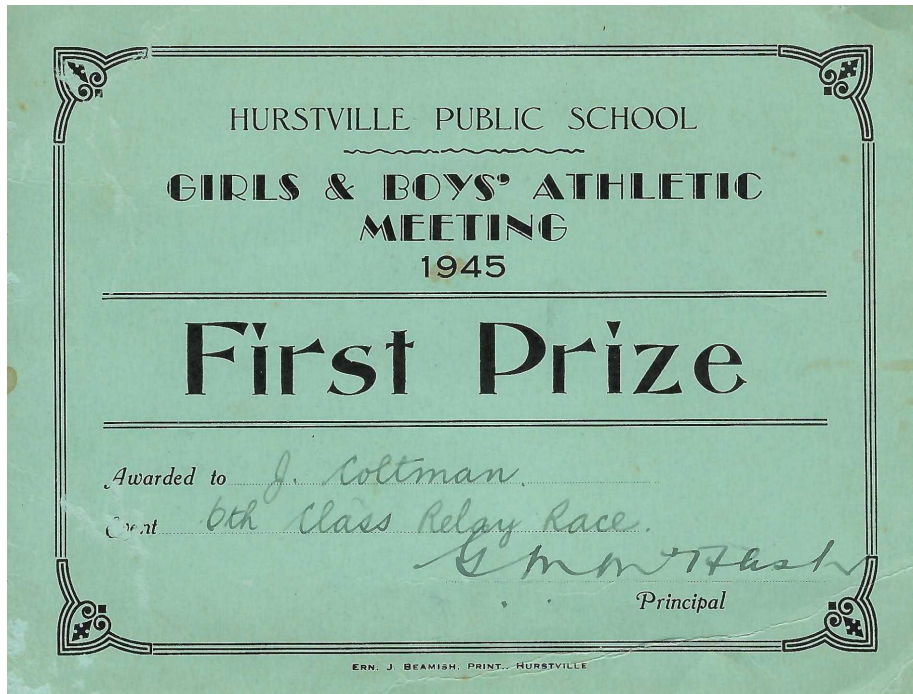
There were air raid trenches dug & we used to have practice getting out of class & into the trenches. When it rained the trenches would fill with water. We never had a real air raid.

Another thing that comes to mind was dancing around the maypole.

My parents decided Oatley Public School wasn't giving me the education I needed & had me transferred to Hurstville Boy's for years 4,5 & 6. I was not at all happy with this, but I had no say in the decision. It meant leaving all my friends behind & making new ones. It also meant I had to be at Oatley Railway Station by 7.30am to catch the train to Allawah & then walk about a mile to the school on Forest Rd.

There was a girls School near the Boys, & they had to catch the train to and from Hurstville, so there could be no fraternising as we walked to school & back. Sometimes after school a group of us who had to catch the train would walk to Hurstville as more trains stopped there. Occasionally we would go into Woolies & sometimes nick a cigarette lighter or can of lighter fluid. There was also a hardware shop where we could buy carbide. If you put the carbide in a screw top bottle, added water & screwed on the lid it didn't take long for the pressure in the bottle to build up & it would explode.

It also meant I didn't get home until about 4.15, which didn't leave much time for play. Instead of a 5 minute walk each way to Oatley school I had to leave about 7.15am from age 9.



My 3 years at Hurstville went ok and I didn't have much trouble making friends as I was quite good at most sports, Athletics & cricket being my favourites.

Academically I was average as I really didn't apply myself.

One night a week Dad would visit his Sister Clyte who had a dressmaker shop at 296 Forest Rd: Bexley. After school I would catch the blue bus which went to Bexley & walk a short way to her shop. Sometimes I would mow her lawn, others I would play with a boy a few doors up. There was a photographer nearby & sometimes we would find rolls of film in his garbage. If you rolled the film really tight and wrapped it tightly in paper, it made the best stink bomb when lit at one end.

Next door to Aunty Clyte was a shop which bought ,sold & swapped comics. As the lady who owned the business knew Aunty, I was always able to borrow a bundle of comics to read for nothing.

The people at the bottom of her garden had a big fig tree which overhung into our yard & in the summertime I was able to feast on the lovely fruit.

Dad would arrive from work just before dinner time & afterwards we would walk 20 minutes from the shop in Forest Rd, to Rockdale Train station & get the train home to Oatley. When we arrived at Oatley it was always my job to race ahead and hop in the one taxi on the stand. If we missed out it was another 15-minute walk home. I would go straight to bed to be ready to wake up at 6.00am the next morning.

One night walking to Rockdale I asked Dad, what did Bill Posters do as there were always signs saying, BILL POSTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. He explained that it was not a person, but if someone put up a poster without permission, that person would be prosecuted.

All my Primary school years were during WW2. There were many restrictions, tea, sugar & butter could only be bought with coupons supplied by the Government. Some people would swap coupons. There was no ice cream or chocolate. At night, no light could show out of your house in case of an air raid. Air Wardens would go around policing this & Dad became a Warden. It was at this time we got a telephone. I still remember the number, LU 3945. Before that if you needed to make a call, it was a 10-minute walk to the nearest public phone box. You put 2 pennies in a little Shute, dialled the number, & when it answered, pressed a button & the pennies ran down the Shute & you were connected. On the odd occasions when an urgent call needed to be made, we used to go 2 doors up to Mrs Dagleish who would allow Mum or Dad to make a call on her candlestick phone.

At the weekends & during the school holidays we used to play down the bush & build secret cubby houses. Street cricket was high on the Agenda with the Taylor boys & other friends. If the ball went over the Bailey's fence on the full it was 6 & out, plus retrieve the ball from amongst the few sheep they had on their spare block. Occasionally a car would come along & the wicket would be removed from the middle of the road until it went past. We weren't disrupted very often in those days. Few had cars & petrol was rationed.

Summer school holidays were mainly spent at the tidal pool , Annette St, Oatley Bay. However, at low tide there was very little water.

We also spent a lot of time catching Cicadas. Climbing trees & getting eggs from birds' nests. As I was only small, I usually had the job of climbing & robbing the

nest. I would put the eggs in my mouth to climb down. The eggs would then be blown, A small hole was put in each end of the egg with a pin, & then the contents were gently blown out. I used to keep them in a shoe box lined with cotton wool.

Sometimes we would go to the train line near the entrance to the Oatley/Como bridge. In those days there was no fence, and the rail line was easily accessible. We would put halfpennies & pennies on the line & hide & wait until the train went by to go & get our flattened coins. Quite a dangerous exercise & something our parents were not told about.

On another occasion, when quite young, I was found by a neighbour fishing off a wharf @ Oyster bay, not far from the Como bridge. I did not realise there was a big dip in the middle of the wharf & as the tide came in it would cover the sunken

portion & prevent me from leaving. Lucky for me I was saved & escorted home.

I joined the Cub Scouts when I was old enough, 8-11, & enjoyed my 4 years there. We met each week at the Oatley School of Arts & I became sixer of the reds. Our leader was a lovely young girl who was called Akela, The Lone Wolf. We played team games & learnt to do lots of things as a pack. There were also badges you could



earn for different things like, tying knots, first aid, hiking, semaphore etc. We also went on occasional camps where we learnt to cook & learn leadership skills. Cubs to Akela, We'll Dib,Dib,Dib,Dib. (do our best) Akela to Cubs, well, Dob Dob Dob Dob (do your best) .

My Mum liked to go for a holiday to Katoomba. Just the 2 of us and no fish to clean! I enjoyed these times away with her & we stayed at different Guest Houses. Long walks, log fires, table tennis etc. In 1939, my last year at primary school we stayed at Felton Woods & Peter Chiswell came with us as company for me. It was here I first played a game of tennis & I took to it straight away. It was to become my major sport for the next 20 or so years.

Mum was always afraid of heights. As a young girl she was on a holiday to Katoomba & went to see the 3 Sisters. At the lookout there was a man standing on the wrong side of the fence & his coat was folded on the ground beside the fence. While Mum was watching he let go & jumped into the Jamieson Valley. After that, she couldn't go close to the edge of any height.

Around 1941, a Picture Theatre opened in Oatley, opposite the School of Arts. It proved to be very popular. Many families had a permanent booking on Saturday nights.

Me & most of my friends would go to the Saturday afternoon matinee. I would be given one shilling, (10cents). Front stalls was six pence & back stalls 9 pence. It was always a dilemma. Go front & have 6 pence to spend or back and have three pence to spend. You could get an ice cream cone for thrippence.

Before the start a picture of the King would show on the screen and everyone would stand & sing the National Anthem, God save the King.

Before the main movie, or picture as it was then called, there was always some cartoons & a serial, like the Green Hornet or Superman etc. After interval, the main picture would show.

Each month the theatre would produce a post card size ink blotter, (no biros then) one side showed all the times and dates for the pictures to be shown that month & the blotter was on the reverse.

When I left Oatley to work in Wagga in 1957, the theatre was still operating, but about 1961 it closed like many suburban theatres, due to TV & the big city theatres.

They were very carefree days, set in quite a different world to the one we live in 2023.

One of my vivid memories of Primary School was in September 1945, when I was in 6th class. At playtime, the school was assembled & we were told the war was over. There was much happiness & we were allowed to go home. Everyone was happy and all the train drivers were blowing their horns. Mum was crying when got home, tears of joy.