

Eunice De Piazza – some memories of a lifetime in Chiltern

(From an interview with Eunice by Janey Runci on 4th January, 2021)

A Childhood in the Findlay family

Eunice De Piazza has spent the whole of her 91 years in Chiltern, apart from a couple of trips. She was born Eunice Findlay on September 11, 1929 at home in a timber house on her parents' dairy farm on the Beechworth road, just past the railway line - the corner of Wills and Main Street. She was the eighth of nine children, born ten years after the previous child when her mother was 45. A number of her seven older siblings had already left home and married. Her brother Kevin was born the year after Eunice.

Eunice's parents began the milking together each morning, and then her father left for his other work – clearing saplings and mistletoe to protect the forest – while her mother finished the milking. As soon as they were old enough Eunice and Kevin delivered the milk in billies on their bicycles around the town before they went to school. In the afternoons a young man helped her mother with the milking. Each day cows had to be herded back and forth along the Beechworth road from the paddocks to the dairy and back.

When Eunice was born her older sister Phil had to leave school to care for the new baby while her mother did the milking. Even though her mother had seven children before Eunice it was only when she was born that a pram was obtained, a wonderful wicker pram that came by train from Melbourne. Phil and Ita enjoyed wheeling the baby everywhere in this new vehicle.

A particular treat on hot summer evenings were the flavoured milk ice blocks collected by Kevin on his bicycle from Mrs Pringle. Mrs Pringle put the ice blocks in Kevin's billy and the wafers in a paper bag. The family sat on the front porch enjoying the ice blocks with cow manure burning in a bucket to ward off the mosquitos.

Along with her brothers and sisters Eunice attended St Joseph's Catholic School, which was then primary and secondary and co-educational and run by the Presentation sisters. It was also a boarding school. Eunice remembers when Elsie, one of the boarders whose mother had died could not go home for the Easter Holidays one of the girls from the town would go up and sleep in the dormitory with her. Eunice found it quite scary with the sound of the wind in the pines.

There were lots of Catholics in Chiltern when Eunice was a child – always a full church on Sunday. The school concert was a very big affair in the town and most of the residents came. Sister Damian, the music teacher would organise beautiful events and the costumes came up on the train from Melbourne. Eunice remembers performing in 'Briar Rose' as a flower floating down a river and singing 'over the foam we glide.' The secondary school closed some time between 1945-50.

Eunice's father had a natural ear for music. He'd been sent for classes as a boy but the teacher said there was no need. He played for all the local dances and there were lots of musical evenings around the piano at home. Eunice herself learnt from the nuns at school and played in a trio with a boarder and another girl.

There were three houses near the Findlays, all attached to the railway station – one for the station master and his family, one for his assistant and one for the ganger. From the ages of 13-16 Eunice enjoyed going to the houses of these neighbours to play the card game 500 with the other children. In 1945 the family moved to Darling Street on the other side of the Beechworth road to a house their uncle had built for their grandmother. The family cared for the grandmother.

Sadly in 1945 Eunice had to leave school at the age of fifteen to help her mother who suffered from a debilitating arthritis. Her older brothers and sisters were married and gone by then.

One of her brothers was a prisoner of war in a Japanese camp in World War 2, working in a coal mine underground. He told the family later that near the end of the war the Japanese were carting fuel down into the mines as they planned to blow the mines up with the prisoners inside when the Americans arrived, but luckily that didn't happen. He weighed only six stone when he returned home.

Working life

Eunice did relief work at the telegraph exchange at first, then worked at Brann's Big Store which took up a large part of the shopping strip in Conness Street and sold everything from drapery to household goods and furniture. When sheets and blankets were scarce the owner kept what supplies were left hidden in some of the wardrobes for sale, to be brought out for faithful customers like the farmers' wives who might come into town to shop only every few months.

When the bookkeeper left Eunice took that job over. However the work was poorly paid at Brann's and when the Wangaratta Woollen Mills opened an Annexe on the Ironbark Tavern site in Conness Street, with better paid piece work available, Eunice went there. She was engaged to be married by then and keen to earn as much as she could to prepare her glory box.

Married life

Johnny De Piazza was in the same class at St Joseph's but she wasn't particularly interested in him at that stage. Around the age of seventeen they began to go to local dances together and were married in on September 1, 1951, a few days before Eunice's 22nd birthday and Johnny's 23rd. They shared the same birthday – September 11.

Eunice and Johnny's first son, Kenneth was born in 1952 after an extended labour. When they left the hospital she was concerned about a small mark on his cheek but she was assured it was nothing. When the mark extended they took him back to the Wangaratta Hospital once and were given ointment, and then the next time he was admitted on a Wednesday. The hospital rang on the Friday to say that he'd been fed at 11 and when they went back at 12 he was dead at three weeks old from a golden staph infection. Eunice and Johnny were advised to have another child straight away.

Michael was born in 1953. At three months old they had to take him to Melbourne for surgery on his hare lip. They were told he would be there for a week and they would not be able to see him in that time.

In 1956 Trevor was born with two thumbs on his right hand and at four years old he had surgery to remove the middle thumb.

In 1967, when Trevor was ten, Eunice and Johnny's daughter, Erin was born.

Eunice was married for almost 40 years. She was 59, her husband 60 when he died suddenly on the way to work of a massive coronary attack.

A great sadness for Eunice is that she and Johnny had to live in difficult conditions with Johnny's father for 37 years of their marriage. It was meant to be a temporary measure while they built their own home, but with the expense of the funeral for their first son and then the surgery for their second one they had to sell the house to her sister and live with Johnny's father.

One day Eunice was working in the hospital kitchen in Chiltern when she began to cry and couldn't stop. Someone went for help and the doctor's wife, Gloria Banks, came and arranged for her to go into the hospital. Meanwhile the doctor - Graeme Banks - called in

Johnny's father who always listened to the doctor, and it was arranged that he go into the nursing home at the hospital. Finally Eunice and Johnny had some time in a house without the father, and then in a cruel blow Johnny died on his way to work in Wodonga. His father lived on for a few more years.

Connection with Lake View

Johnny De Piazza had a special connection with Lily Salmon, the woman who donated Lake View to the National Trust. When he was six his mother died and he went to live with the Harvey family who were the bakers in Chiltern for many years. Mrs Harvey was an English war bride who retained her accent. The oldest girl in the Harvey family was Lil, who went on to become Lily Salmon. Johnny and Eunice often visited the Salmon family on their farm out at Howlong.

Lil's father had bought Lake View when it was near demolition to save it. In the years before it had been owned by the Wilkies after Mr Wilkie came back from the war, and then by Irwin (Tootie) & Marie Raine, and then housed migrant workers and their families for some time before Mr Harvey bought it. When he died he left it to Lil. She 'tidied it up', made it a reasonable place to stay and donated it to the National Trust. The gazebo in the Lake View garden is dedicated to the memory of Lil Salmon.

Eunice worked as a volunteer one day a week at Lake View for many years, mostly when Mary Vyner was in charge (1975-96). She's been attending the picnic teas for between 30 and 40 years and says it's always very enjoyable and pleasant, catching up with everyone and she appreciates the speakers – 'It's always great to hear about history'.

2021

Trevor is now in Western Australia, Michael on the Sunshine Coast and Erin lives in Chiltern. She comes every morning to visit Eunice at 8.30 with her dog and when they leave the dog shakes Eunice's hand.

Erin and her husband, Andrew form a music duo with guitars and singing, and their son, Jedd, now 19, studies computer science at University as well as managing a small business making websites. During the University break he is working at the newly opened Posh Plonk café in the old Masonic Hall in Main Street, Chiltern, just over the road from his own home. Eunice was involved with the care of Jedd from the age of six weeks when his parents were performing. She would pick him up in the pram on a Friday or Saturday night and take him back the next morning.

Eunice's father died in 1974 at the age of 94. Eunice is now the last of the siblings alive, Her sister Phil died in 2013 at the age of 97, still in her own home. Even as she was being taken to hospital Phil asked her daughter to check that she had her comb and lipstick in her bag.