

## REMINISCENCE BY ANDREA JOHNSON

The prompt word of Week 3 of the 52 Ancestors in 52 Weeks is "Longevity."

As soon as I read the word 'longevity' I instantly knew who was to be the subject of this week's topic. Neil's Grandmother, Myrtle McKenzie was just 4 months short of turning 102 years old when she passed away on 30 June 2008. Myrtle was born 22 Nov 1906 in Walhalla, Victoria, the first of 7 children born to James McKenzie and Emily (nee Thomas). Her father James was a miner at the Black Diamond Mine, located high on the hill above the Walhalla camping ground.

For those not familiar with Walhalla it is a small town on the banks of the Thomson River, with one road in and one road out weaving its way through the steep terrain. Walhalla has its origins from the Victorian gold rush period and it enjoyed a prosperous 52 year period of constant gold mining. The last of the major gold mines closed in 1914 and the bulk of the population soon left including the McKenzie family who made a new home, 150kms away, in Wonthaggi. Wonthaggi was an attraction because of the newly opened coal mine which was a source of employment for Myrtle's father and brothers.

Myrtle was married in the Wonthaggi Presbyterian Church to Stanley Edward Johnson on 30 June 1928. It is not known when or how they met, as Stanley was born in Albert Park, the son of a bootmaker. Stanley's father Edward had a shop on Montague St, where Stanley also took up that trade. Perhaps Myrtle popped into the shop one day to have her boots repaired, and met the man of her dreams.

Myrtle and Stanley moved onto a house at 1 Bishoff St, West Preston, a house that was built by Myrtle's brothers, Jack and Don. A daughter Norma was born the following year, and 2 years later a son Don arrived. Don couldn't wait to be born, and was hastily delivered in the hallway of the family home. Stanley died suddenly in 1957. Myrtle remarried in 1962 to Eric Wellington, but sadly Eric passed away 8 years later. Myrtle then took in a border, Clive, who also worked at Sidchrome. Clive came from Calcutta and had no family contact in Australia, and quickly became part of Myrtle's family, in fact he called her 'Mum', or 'Myrt'. Clive was a constant companion for the remainder of her life, which took in another 30 years.

One story that Myrtle delighted in telling people was from her childhood of her father James, living in a cave in Walhalla. One morning when he woke up he noticed the quantity of the milk in a jug on the kitchen table seemed to be somewhat lower than what it had been the night before. The following morning, he found the reason behind the disappearing milk, a large snake was caught drinking from the jug of milk.

Myrtle was known throughout the family as 'Grammy'. For as long as any family member could remember, Grammy always worked. She worked at Sidchrome Tools in West Heidelberg, until she was forced to retire at age 65, and she was not happy about this. Even after retirement to keep herself busy she used to drive over to Toorak to keep an old lady, company. The old lady, Mrs Craig, was barely a few years older than Grammy, but she was still referred to as the 'old lady', and Grammy was still driving until she was in her mid 90s. She was fiercely independent to the point where, at one stage the family considered that it was unsafe for her to be driving but she outsmarted us all by calling the RACV to get her car going again after the family had disabled it.

Reluctantly it became necessary for her to live in an aged care facility. The day she moved in the words still ring in my ears, "see that front fence, I'll be over that as soon as you leave". Despite Grammy's initial dislike to her new home, she spent her final years happy and contented. I can't help but think that her 100th birthday celebration was one of the greatest moments of her long life, and I remember the sparkle in her eyes when she was read her congratulatory letter from the Queen, along with those from other dignitaries, including the Prime Minister. She looked very Queen like herself, sitting there with her tiara on, in front of all her subjects (the family). She was very much the family matriarch. Some correspondence from the Walhalla Historical Society suggested that she may have been the longest-lived Walhalla born person, despite a life of hard work.

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