

MY MEMORIES AS A CHILD IN CHILDREN'S HOMES

I was born Pauline Dulcie Cox on the 14-7-1932.

It was depression time and people had a tough time trying to eke out a living.

I was the third child in a poor family of four children. I had two brothers and an older sister. My mother told me of some of the hard times they had to endure at that time .

My Father used to stand in line for a work ticket along with many others. Jobs were very scarce and if you were lucky they called out your name. My Father at that time if he was fortunate enough to get called for work, would work for seven shillings and sixpence.

Many people were malnourished and a lot of women died in childbirth or their babies were born suffering from malnutrition. In my earliest memories I can remember some

Aunty must have given us some food at Christmas once, because I remember seeing a little Plum Pudding in a china basin and a packet of silver horseshoes, thimbles etc. to put in each piece of pudding. I also saw at the window one night a terrible face that had a light in it .I was very frightened, and it was not until many years later that I found out that it had been halloween. Someone had put a face in a hollowed out pumpkin and put a lighted candle inside it. They then held it up at the window .

There are many traumatic memories I have of my childhood that I can remember but very few happy ones.

Because my parents could not pay their rent we were all evicted and put out on the street.

Some of us had chickenpox so my parents had to find us somewhere to live. We apparently had an old horse and cart which we used to move our things While going

along in the cart our horse dropped dead from old age and my Father became the horse in the shafts. My mother and the two older children had to push the cart while my younger brother and I rode in it. I don't remember all the details, only seeing my dad in the shafts

We eventually came to a very old place that looked like a shed. My Father asked the man that lived there (I remember his name) if we could stay in the stable until he found us

somewhere to live. He and his old Mother took us in and apparently fed us and let us sleep in the house. The memories I have of this man are memories of fear as he was a crocodile hunter from Queensland and he told me he was going to take me with him and tried to put me in a sack I screamed and screamed I would have been around three years old. I was so traumatized. I can't remember anything more about then.

My Mother was working in a guest house later on and the green grocer wanted me to be his little girl so I used to hide under the table so he could not see me.

There were many other things that happened before my Mother and Father's marriage broke up and it was decided that we four children were to be sent to a children's home.

We were bathed in a wooden wash trough and were told we were going for a nice holiday.

My only memory of the court case before we went into the home as wards of the state was of my Father crying. The tears were streaming down his face.



We were taken to the then, Royal Park Children's Home. We were told to go and look at all the lovely toys through a glass window like a shop and while we were looking in this window I turned to say something to Mum only to see her running out of the gate. She may have been crying I don't really know.

Next my sister Sylvia and I were taken to a room where we had swabs taken of our throats and ears and thoroughly examined. Then we were put in an isolation ward with a lot of beds in it but only us two girls were there. We used to look out the window to where there were other buildings. It was so traumatic that I cannot remember much but my sister said that I just cried and cried for my Mother. My poor sister who was going through her own grief was told to try and stop me from crying which was very hard on her as both our hearts were breaking. I was five years old and Sylv was eight. It was a great burden for her to carry We were there from 23-3-38 to 31-3-38.

It was then that Sylvia and I by the court's authority were taken to the Kildonnen Girls Home in Burwood. Our two brothers stayed at Royal Park and were later sent to the Minton Boys Home in Frankston Vic.

Sylv and I were taken to a big dormitory which we shared with other junior girls. I was obviously so traumatized that I can't remember Sylv being around at all but she told me that she was in the bed next to me. There was a crippled girl there who had had polio and she had to sleep with a box between her legs. Her name was Joan. There was also an eighteen year old girl there her name was Florrie, she was reared in the home and then stayed on to work there. She was very nice and kind to me. She used to bath us girls in trough like baths. One night after lights were out someone decided to play throw the slipper. We all must have made a lot of noise because suddenly the light went on and there stood the Matron and I was the one still holding the slipper. Matron gave me a few whacks with the slipper through the blankets. I laughed so much after she'd gone that I wet my bed. In the morning I told Florrie I had wet my bed and she said "never mind, I'll change your sheets."

There were a couple of old trams in the yards for us girls to play in.

Two things I hated while we were there were the huge china cups filled with Epsom Salts that we had to drink some mornings. I used to cry and want to vomit. One day after drinking the salts and crying, a window went up just near me and a hand came out and gave me a toffee. I don't know who it was as they shut the window just as quickly as they had opened it. I have never forgotten that act of kindness and just pray that God blessed whoever it was for their compassion.

The other thing I hated was the black and white pillow ticking pantaloons we had to wear, they were like a singlet and pants in one and I still can't remember how we had to get them undone. Each of us girls were responsible for keeping the floor polished underneath our beds. I remember one day I wanted to go to the toilet but must have been too scared to ask if I could go. We were being supervised and I was only five years old and I wet myself so I polished it up with my cloth. I must have cleaned it up pretty good as I never heard anymore about it.

There were two little black boys there in another building and we were afraid of them at the time. We later learned they were a lot older than little boys but apparently had something wrong with them.

I can remember going to one picnic there and after racing with the other kids I felt very thirsty. I had a bottle of soda water given to me and it made me feel very sick.

We wore green dresses all week and orange ones on Sunday. It was a Presbyterian Home so I guess we went to church. We were not there very long, about four and a half weeks but time has no meaning when you are in those places.

On the 2-5-38 we were taken to a lovely family Mr & Mrs Ingham who lived in Bendigo. They were very kind to Sylv and I even though they were well up in years, they did a great job taking us in and looking after us. We were well fed and kept clean. I have many happy memories at the Ingham's. Mrs Ingham made us some lovely clothes and when I had my sixth birthday and was ready to start school she knitted me a little red jumper and beret to wear to school. She also bought me a little oval black enameled sponge tin to wash my slate. I remember walking to school and standing on all the icy puddles as I loved to hear them crack under my feet.

Their daughter Dorothy worked at Coles in Bendigo and would sometimes bring us home some chocolate, that had diamond shaped patterns on it. Their other daughter Emily worked in the hotel. One day Mrs Ingham took us into a big building in Bendigo which was the Welfare Centre and told us to be good girls and wait until a lady came out to us. Mrs Ingham said goodbye and with tears in her eyes left us sitting in the Welfare place. We had been with them for nine months.

I don't know how long we sat there but Sylvia told me it was a long time.

Then a middle aged lady with glasses came out and said "I'm your new mother and you can call me mum. I'm taking you home with me." Sylv said to her "I already have a Mother" and I apparently cried (did I ever stop!?) and said "I want to go home with my Mummy"

This woman was Mrs Bramley also from Bendigo. When we got to Bramley's Mrs Bramley did not ask us in but sent us to play with the other six children she had from the Welfare, while she unpacked our cases. We had pretty clothes which we never saw again and entered a phase of our lives that today would not be believed. Only others who have gone through these things could ever understand.

The other children Bruce and Mary Sassay brother and sister, Sylv and I, Melvis Martin one year younger than I and three little boys Albert, Toby and baby Allan.

When we were given lunch we got mince patties and dry bread, tea was also the same and every breakfast was stale bread, scones or scraps from the bakery with warm water. It was sop. We ate all our meals Summer and Winter in a closed in verandah and was never allowed in the kitchen for a long, long time. In the eighteen months we were there we never saw milk, butter, or sugar. Our school lunch was two thick dry slices of bread with pickles, jam or syrup on them and was wrapped in newspaper.

We lived in an old dirty house with bed bugs that used to bite us all night. Our heads were full of lice. It's a wonder anybody had anything to do with us. We never saw a lolly or icecream. I used to pick up chewing gum off the street and chew it.

There was an old Chinese fruit and vegetable man and he would throw out rotten fruit which we used to pick up and eat, until he yelled at us to go away

I was given the job of rinsing out the baby's dirty nappies under the tap over the gully trap I was promised a penny a week if I would do this but I don't remember if I ever got a penny or not.

We never saw biscuits or cakes but I remember being sent to the milk bar one day for something and there was a big dog in the shop who was having a birthday. They were giving him meat pies and icecream. I remember just looking and thinking how lucky he was.

There was a little girl at Bramley's who was being sexually molested. She was five years old and we were walking to school one day and she said to me that she was hurting and could not walk to school. I told the teacher when we got there and they told me to borrow a pram and wheel her home. I asked a lady in a house and she loaned us this old pram for me to wheel Melvis home.

Mr Bramly was a very big tall man. I don't know what damage was done to her but I don't remember seeing her much after that.

Mr Bramley used to bring home pears from Shepparton when he worked and put them under the house in a cellar We could eat the bad fruit but were not allowed to touch the good stuff. The lady next door had a lovely quince tree and we used to go through a hole in her fence and pinch the quinces but she was a nice lady and let us have them.

The little baby, Allan was only a few months old and was fed arrowmilk biscuits with hot water Mrs Bramley would feed him from a spoon from which she took most of the food for herself. I saw her with a pointy piece of soap which she was putting in his bottom and I asked why she was doing that. It's to help him dirty his nappy she said.

We were never shown love or kindness and looking back I wonder how come the Welfare never came to check up on the conditions we children were in The house was so bad with bugs, I remember them carrying out an old mattress and the bugs were falling out of it onto the floor. My sister told me before we could go to Sunday School we had to get the bugs from underneath our hat bands.

I got the measles while I was there and was sent home sick from school, Mrs Bramley gave me a tablespoon of castor oil and sent me to bed.

Mum came to see us once or twice while we were in that home. How she could not see the condition we were in beats me. Of course for those occasions we were dressed up nicely and had berets on our heads.

I would cry and cry at nights wanting to go home to Mum and when the steam train would blow it's whistle in the distance I felt a loneliness and longing to go home, that is impossible to describe.

However there is one good thing about this part of my life and that is that we were sent to Sunday School which was Church of Christ. We had to walk a long way but it was the bright spot in my week. I think that we were sent to get us all out of the way.

Mrs Bramley never seemed to be home at night and my sister was left in charge of all these children at nine years of age. But back to Sunday School. While there I learned about a person named Jesus who loved little children. I learned lovely songs about him and how to pray or talk to him. From then on I knew somebody loved me and I would pray to Him at night that I would be taken home to my mother.

I forgot to say that in the wired in verandah where we ate our meals there was a hole in the floor over the cellar. Just a small hole but a lot of food was put down there such as green hare, maggoty meat etc that Sylv did not want to tell us about because we were never given enough to eat anyway.

There were a lot of other things but I have covered most of them from my memory.

One day after we had been at Bramleys for eighteen months, my Mother and Aunt Rene from Mitcham came to take Sylv and I to live with Aunt Rene. They deloused our hair all the way from Bendigo to Mitcham. Aunt Rene was lovely but our Uncle put us down and made us feel like lower class people. We were to stay with Aunt Rene for fourteen months in which time I was sexually assaulted by a boarder they had living there who happened to be my Mother's boyfriend.

When we went back to Mum on 30-9-41 I was nine years old and the sexual abuse that had been going on when I was seven at my Aunt's place continued on until my Mother and this man broke up later on.

I would like to say that my childhood was happy when we went back home to Mum's but she was very strict and there still wasn't any love. Yes we got plenty to eat and were kept clean but the bonding which should have been there was gone and because of no love we just went to school and out to work at thirteen and fourteen and took care of our own lives.

I got very sick at fifteen with kidney trouble ( from a very severe beating ) and had to stay in bed a lot of the time. Mum used to get the Weekly Times which had a penfriend column in it and Mum said "why don't you write to someone?" They put an add in the Weekly Times for me and a lovely man who three years later was to become my husband was one of the people who answered. No girl had a more loving, loyal man. It was the happiest time of my life.

We were blessed with two little girls and although we were poor the love we shared far outweighed what we lacked in worldly goods.

We went to church and became Born Again Christians. Soon after we went to the outback of N.S.W. to trap rabbits which paid for our block of land near Ballarat where we had an old house where we spent our first happy years. Then in early 1960 we were asked if we would like to work for the station that we were trapping on. We agreed and were moved from our home in our tent where we were very happy up to a little house on the property.

Wal turned thirty six on the ninth of June and on the fifteenth suddenly dropped dead while working with the bosses son John .

I was twenty seven years old with two little girls to look after so I stayed on as cook for another eight months before bringing my girls back to our home from where they went to school. This was the home that Wal and I shared together that was on the block of land we bought near his family..

How can I explain the grief and loss and again heartache of losing someone who had become so special in my life. In fact the only person who ever really loved me in my whole life. I can only say that it was because of being a Christian and having Christ in my life that I was able to carry on and cope with his help.

I want everybody who reads this to know you can overcome the traumatic memories of being abandoned.

I have no bitterness or hatred for those that caused so much pain in my childhood, it has taught me compassion for other abused and mistreated children.

With many other heartaches and trauma's through my life until now, I would like to say that only Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour has brought me through it all and I know he will always be there for me. If you would like He can help you too.

Pauline Stevenson.