

MEMORIES

OF

WARBURTON

MERLE MAY (CHIPPERFIELD)

2000

PREFACE

The Chipperfield family came from Gardiner and my grandfather was a respected business man dealing in leather goods. They were staunch members of the Gardiner Church of Christ. Father was working in a shoe shop in Hawthorn.

My father arrived in Warburton in 1932 aged 17 to assist his father in the management of their newly purchased grocery business. Grandfather was beginning again after losing a very successful leather goods business in South Melbourne due to the depression. A second business was purchased in Glen Waverly, a market garden community, for father's elder brother to manage. When George found the grocery business was not to his liking grandfather took over this business leaving my father in charge at Warburton.

Mother's parents were encouraged by their nephew, Les Elsbury, to visit Warburton. He was a travelling dentist in the area and appreciated its beauty. Warburton boasted many fine guest houses and was an easy, comfortable train ride from Melbourne. Thus it became a very popular destination for holidays and honeymoons in the cash strapped decade of the 30's. Mother's family happened to stay at the guest house where father was taking his evening meals and thus the 56 year relationship began. The distance from Warburton to Williamstown did not prove a barrier to their love and eventual marriage in August 1939.

The Spencers came from Footscray and then Williamstown and were honest, hard working 'blue collar' workers with a strong sense of family.

MERLE'S STORY 1940-1950

LIFE BEHIND THE GROCERY STORE

My memory of the store and residence -

Stairs feature in my early memories of Warburton - stairs to the residence above the shop, stairs from the residence into the shop, stairs to the depths of the mysterious store room with its delicious smells and stairs with a landing to the bedrooms and bathroom above.

The shop was quite large with double doors set back between two display windows. Inside, to the right, ran a long wooden counter with floor to ceiling shelves stocked to capacity with housewife's necessities. Strategically placed in front of this counter were two wooden chairs where older customers could rest while placing their order. This area included the large, lidded, lined bins containing flour, sugar, oats etc. On the higher shelves only reached by a convenient ladder were the numerous jars of boiled sweets spices and biscuits. Along the left side was another counter this time with glass display, where china and glassware were sold.

A door to the storeroom was located beyond the grocery counter and beside that steps led to an upper level which contained a small office and a large marble bench used for cutting up and wrapping cheese and butter. The small office behind the cheese counter overlooked the back yard. Beside it were three steps into the residence.

As you stepped from the store into the residence you would encounter on your right seven stairs a landing then seven more stairs at an angle to two bedrooms, a lounge room and a bathroom. Stepping into the living area you would find a kitchen to your right and one large living room containing an open fireplace and dining setting. Beyond was a small landing and the stairs to the backyard our main entrance. Later a playroom was added to the right of this landing and the kitchen window overlooked it.

Mother worked tirelessly without the modern conveniences of today. The old wood stove had to be fed continually to provide hot water and food, the wood having to be brought up the steep flight of stairs into the living area. Fortunately father was a conscientious man who never failed to provide her with these necessities although I know she did a certain amount of wood chopping when supplies, ran low. Washing was carried out in the laundry directly below the stairs in the usual copper with its fire box hungry for very small pieces of wood accurately cut for the purpose. The exercise of washing took a full morning once a week due to the effort required. Thus we were instructed to keep ourselves clean and wear underclothes for several days to save on washing.

Father was a stickler for routine and every Saturday night was bath night. The bathroom was upstairs and included a wood heater above the bath. Father would bring up a supply of short lengths of wood and sit on the end of the bath preparing his Sunday School lessons for the next morning as he kept the heater burning to give us all a bath. Mother and Father would enjoy the first bath and we children would follow when the water was cooler.

For two young girls (Bruce our brother was born towards the end of our time above the store), life behind and above the grocery store was exciting. We were never bored and because Mother and Father's life was so busy we had much time to run, jump, explore and in fact run a bit wild on the streets, rail yards, timber mill and factory grounds which bordered our world at the top end of the small town. If our parents had known what we got up to during our ramblings they would have been quite shocked. It was surprising that we had so much freedom as Mum was a terrible worrier.

The railway terminus was located between the football oval and the main street. This included a large engine shed (very dark and spooky) and a large turntable. The engine was run onto the track in the middle of an enormous pit and the engine was then turned 180o by hand. We would often be invited by the engineer to help push the engine around. I can still feel the steel in that enormous handle and remember the pleasure of moving the massive steam engine full circle.

The Sanitarium breakfast food factory was only four doors up from the store. This factory was a large cream brick edifice surrounded by manicured gardens, architecturally quite out of place in a sawmilling town, but providing a readymade playground for the children on the main street and many happy hours were spent in the branches of the old oak trees and huge pines. A sympathetic employee was often known to hand the hungry little visitors warm weet bix straight off the assembly line.

Our end of town also included cattle yards. The railway line branch track ran up to the factory and so cattle yards were placed on this branch line for the local farmers. Trains were the only means of getting produce to the city. Many happy hours were spent climbing the fences and admiring the cattle, sheep or pigs waiting to be transported to the slaughter yards in Melbourne. To my shame I recall an incident when we thoughtless, cruel little imps thought it was fun to throw stones at a pen of pigs. Unfortunately one of my stones missed the pigs and collected my sister on the head as she bobbed up after retrieving her next stone, requiring several stitches - our punishment was complete!

Father worked from dawn until dark keeping the very busy, thriving grocery store ticking over, and mother worked just as hard keeping the home fires burning, pursuing charitable pursuits and, when necessary, assisting in the running of the store. Both parents were pillars of the Presbyterian church and therefore Sunday was mostly kept for church activities although, often, there was book keeping to complete. Timber workers from bush mills would not arrive in Warburton until Saturday afternoon and Father would rise extremely early on Sunday morning to complete their orders before Church for pick up Sunday evening on the return to the bush. The 40's was an austere period and widespread car ownership was a thing of the future. Wages were low and the average income earner depended on public transport for their mobility. For this reason delivery of essential goods was a large part of the grocer's business. Collection of orders to the east and west of Warburton would be made early in the week for delivery by Friday. During school holidays father would often take us with him on these excursions and the housewives would spoil us with goodies. One farm used a flying fox across the Yarra to deliver their order and to receive their groceries.

My parents always managed to keep a very pretty garden behind the store. As I got older I was given a section of garden beside the narrow drive and against the fence of Granddad's house. Imagine my surprise when many years later I returned to the site to find one of the acorns collected from the factory garden and diligently planted had produced a tree as high as the fence.

You may wonder whether they had time for the two small daughters but we were never neglected and adored by both parents. Many happy hours were spent in the evenings reading or being read to, listening to the radio learning new skills of sewing and knitting and being taken out on picnics and outings as we were very fortunate to always own a car. On very hot summer evenings Father would take us to the river to cool off after closing the store. Sometimes mother would pack a picnic tea to enjoy on the river bank after father's swimming lessons. The closest spot was behind the Signs Publishing Company, a Seventh Day Adventist printing company for the production of their religious literature, and many hot evenings were spent there. As this water hole was too deep for two inexperienced swimmers, we girls would play on the edge as father swam across the river. However, one eventful day the bank I was standing on gave way and I floated off in terror. Father dived in from the other side

of the river and could only see my hair floating away but managed to quickly rescue me. My fear of water may have stemmed from that event.

Father was a quiet, diligent, ordered character with a strong sense of right and wrong. He ruled the family firmly and possessed a strong right hand for smacking. As little girls we failed to understand that the discipline he administered was in his mind for our good. It was not until our teens we were able to successfully retaliate with a bit of cheek after discovering his bark was much worse than his bite. Although we were quite frightened of his reactions we still managed to get into mischief and felt very rewarded if we got away with anything. However, his strict discipline did have the effect of sapping our confidence something we never quite recovered. By the time Bruce came along he was mellowing. The extremely long hours at the work face and the struggle to maintain a viable business in this small country town could explain his often very short fuse.

Grandparents played a huge role in our young lives. Our paternal grandparents lived in the house next-door for some time and many happy hours were had assisting Nana in her kitchen or Pa in the garden. Out minor injuries would always be tendered by Nana who kept a kitchen drawer of freshly washed and rolled bandages (torn from old sheets) for the perceived injury. Although our paternal grandparents lived so close we were never as close to them as our maternal grandparents who, although living at Williamstown, many miles from Warburton, visited regularly. Pa Spencer never owned a car so they would make the journey by train often to baby-sit while mother and father enjoyed an outing to the theatre or a ball. What fun when they arrived. The two of them possessed the 'patience of Job' teaching us every card game, waiting patiently as we learned to shuffle and deal. Nana taught us to knit and sew and Pa being a handy man made us toys and furniture.

Nana and Pa Spencer doted on their only daughter (having lost their adored son to stomach cancer at the young age of 21). Mother always declared that the cancer stemmed from a canoe accident when the young Ron was tossed from a capsizing canoe and dealt a nasty blow to the stomach. We girls were the reason for their sanity after this tragic loss and they both lavished every attention on us. Pa had been a loyal employee of the PMG installing many exchanges around Melbourne including Collingwood and Footscray. They lived a simple life and enjoyed few luxuries but could always find little extras for their 'girls'.

Christmas was always particularly exciting. Nana and Pa would make the journey from Williamstown and assist in the preparation of the Christmas feast which always included a chicken our only taste of this meat for the year. Puddings, Christmas cakes and biscuits had been prepared weeks before and the anticipation of a visit from Father Christmas was almost too much to bear. Although times were rather difficult following the second World War we were much feted and spoilt by our parents and our Christmas stockings were always overflowing with the goodies we had wished for plus many surprises. Some years we would make the journey to Williamstown for this annual festival and enjoy dinner around the table in that little Californian Bungalow at 49 Chandler Street.

This house held the most treasured memories for we girls. It never changed - hand made hassocks under the round table to rest our feet on, jars of carefully sharpened pencils and homemade pads for us to draw on, the drawer of old china dolls and the drawer of material pieces to cut up and sew. On our many holidays at Williamstown we enjoyed the ice-man coming to replace the ice in the ice-box (the only refrigeration). We would run out and pick up the pieces of ice he had chipped off, to suck (oblivious to the fact the horse had just covered that ground). The baker called and we would pick the hot bread from the loaf he had just broken in half. Horse drawn vehicles were the norm including the milkman and the bottle collector with his lovely yodel of "bottle-o" as he proceeded down the back lane.

Our paternal grandparents had moved to a house at 110 Elgar Road Box Hill. Occasionally we girls were left with them during the usual Melbourne trip, probably during school holidays. Pa and nanna had difficulty showing their feelings and we really never knew where we stood in their emotions. However, Pa would always make Granola (a breakfast cereal) and he would have a small basin full for each of us after the long trip from Warburton. It was piping hot and nourishing and always much anticipated on these rare visits. The house overlooked Wattle Park and Ruth and I spent many hours exploring the eroded creek bed and surrounds. One visit we were to stay with them for a night but our Aunt Edna who lived above her cake shop in Glenferrie Road Hawthorn took us to stay with her. I remember sleeping on an open verandah overlooking Glenferrie road and the unfamiliar sound of trams rumbling up and down fascinated me. The following day we were allowed to discover the mysteries of a city shopping centre and I can still remember the magic of Coles Variety Store.

Mother was a needle woman and spent many hours making identical dresses for her two daughters. Most only differed in colour. So much love, planning and execution went into each creation. There were always new outfits for Christmas, Easter, Sunday School Anniversaries and special family occasions. When she wasn't sewing and knitting for the family she was creating delightful handiwork for the annual Ladies Guild Fete. This would include dozens of aprons (her record was 76), oven mitts, pots of jam and preserves. Her talents were amazing as she proved later when she became a craft instructor in the Country Women's Association. She became proficient in every new craft including macramé, cane basket making, quilting, smocking, tapestry, cross stitch and many more.

Father always made weekly visits to Melbourne for supplies. It was well known in Warburton that he would go out of his way to obtain an item for his customers and it would be waiting for them on Wednesday morning. In the early days of the grocery business he drove an old International ex-army truck and visited all the wholesale grocery outlets. Often mother and the girls would accompany him, shop for their own needs in Melbourne and then catch the train to Williamstown for lunch. Father would arrive around dinner time after which the long journey across Melbourne to Lilydale and then the winding road back to Warburton would be endured.

Life in a busy grocery store was never dull. Pre-packaging was yet to come so all supplies arrived in bulk and were then bagged and packed by quite a large staff. We girls loved to assist the staff who were so patient. Coconut, walnuts, dates etc arrived in large tea chests and little pockets were often filled before skipping through the shop to play. Biscuits arrived in tins approximately 1 ft (30 cm) high by 11 inches (28 cm) wide. These would be stacked on the large shelves in the shop with colourful labels showing the customer would make a selection and the staff member would bag them (no tongs or rubber gloves required). When the tin was almost empty but for the broken biscuits they would be removed to the garage or shed behind the store ready for return to the supplier - no doubt to be re-filled. We girls loved to get into the shed and go through the tins retrieving all the broken biscuits to share with our friends. This activity was not approved of by father as we could never return the tins to their neat resting places and he always knew when we had been visiting. We often found it prudent to post a lookout to alert us of father's approach.

Assisting father in little chores for the shop was considered an honour and carried out with gusto. One favourite activity was standing on upturned boxes at the large marble counter wrapping the freshly cut butter in one and 1/2 pound paper wraps. Eggs were delivered in large cartons and we loved to tear the newspaper into four equal sized pieces and then wrap each egg to be packed into brown paper bags - no flash egg cartons in those days. During and for sometime after the war, food was rationed and a housewife would receive a book of coupons, some of which had to be handed to the grocer for each purchase. The grocer would then adhere these coupons to large sheets provided by the Government. We

girls spent many happy hours in the breakfast room assisting in this chore. My competitive nature always had me striving to complete the highest number of forms or the most number of wrapped eggs. Poor Ruth, I always managed to beat her in most things but brushing mother's hair to receive a penny for 5 minutes was something she excelled at - no wonder she became a hairdresser.

My memories of the shop included mice which, of course, were numerous particularly in the feed store. This was a large shed at the rear of the property containing bags of animal feed to be delivered to the local farmers. Large bins of pollard, wheat and oats were a great attraction for mice. You would think that a child experiencing so many mice would grow accustomed to them but I carry a horror of these tiny creatures to this day. We did laugh however, when Phil (one of the grocery lads) exhausted himself racing around the shed with a large stick trying to eliminate the furry creatures. Much to my horror one little mouse managed to drown himself in the toilet bowl (we were the only family in our end of town with a septic system) and there after I refused to go to any toilet without an inspection and would not go to a toilet in the dark.

Dark always held some fear for us and I can recall being quite frightened to go alone to the upstairs rooms at night and if I really had to would race up and down so fast ray toes hardly touched the stairs. Perhaps that was the reason for my speed later in life.

Fears were never expressed, a stiff upper lip was expected and maintained. I know I had a horror of the local drunk (possibly a victim of war injuries) and would run inside very quickly if I encountered him or lie in bed trembling when I heard him rolling home. It was a great relief to me when I heard he had been found dead in a gutter. I now feel, sadly, that there seemed to be a lack of understanding and compassion in the community and an unwillingness to explain to we children the background to such a tragedy.

This lack of explanation to children was most evident in the birth of our brother, Bruce when I was seven years old. We girls were not told of the coming event and apparently hadn't noticed mother's bulging figure - always cunningly disguised under appropriate clothing. Father greeted us one morning with the news that the angels had sent us a baby brother and mother had to care for him in the local hospital. My joy was apparent as I ran to school telling everyone who would listen. At the time I would walk miles to visit babies as I had an affinity with them and many mothers were happy to have me entertain their little ones. Mother was not very fond of babies and was quite happy for me to spend hours taking care of Bruce, I was in 'Seventh Heaven'. Poor Bruce was blessed with three mothers and was no doubt happy to get to the obnoxious 2's when the girls lost interest in him as a living baby doll.

Although mother came from a working class background she had been raised to think of herself as a cut above most others. This attitude kept her a little aloof in the small town and although she did make friends they were more often at arms length, many never being invited to her home. When the question of school for her girls came up she could not envisage them mixing with the rough locals at the State run school so enrolled us into Warburton's only private school, run by the Seventh Day Adventists. This decision was a mixed blessing for us. The education was sound and the children were refined but we did not make close friends as we were considered outsiders and were often reminded of this by the educators. This difference manifested itself in many strange ways. At that time Adventists were strict vegetarians and mother would send us to school with cold meat sandwiches after the Sunday roast. One student took it upon herself to inspect our lunches and would remove the meat, leaving us with bread and butter. Religious education was important and it was regularly pointed out to us that we would not get to Heaven - a strict Presbyterian background did not count for anything at the Golden Gates. I was very competitive and athletic and managed to organise games in which I could excel. Although in many ways I lacked confidence in myself, I was good at disguising these inadequacies and displayed a brash, confident, capable persona. Many teachers chose me as a leader and I was

often called on to assist with younger classes if teachers were absent. My love for teaching probably stemmed from being given these responsibilities from a young age.

Although a small town can be very quiet we did have excitement in the form of visiting exhibitions, concerts, balls and the annual visit of a circus. The circus would set up on the football oval behind the shop and included rides and a side show alley. The biggest headache for the adults was the continual amplified playing of the most popular hit song of that year. The year a local girl was mysteriously shot in the arm by one of the circus attendants was its last in Warburton.

A particular highlight was the arrival in our small town of the Jubilee train. We were thrilled to see it shunted onto the branch line behind the shop for its stay. We visited many times and I remember being particularly impressed with the jewels.

Just after Bruce was born (April 1948) mother began to look for a house away from the main street. By this time my parents were running a drapery store as well as the grocery store and intended to sell the grocery business. Seeking a suitable house was no easy task in Warburton as it had stagnated once the Upper Yarra dam was completed, and mother had particular qualities in mind which were not readily available. We watched a house being built on top of a hill across the Yarra from the shop. I remember mother gazing at it from the kitchen window and saying that house will slide off that hill in a heavy downpour. The house was built for sale and we were amazed when mother announced they had bought it.

The hill on the corner of Brisbane Parade and Blackwood Avenue was covered in bracken and weeds but had a very pretty creek meandering down one side and under the drive. The extremely steep drive could only be traversed in fine weather. The house was built by a 'jerry builder' but was solid containing only two bedrooms a lounge room and a kitchen. Mother very quickly had builders in to add a large living area, a sun room, a third bedroom and a toilet (the toilet and laundry being in an outhouse). The garage was built under the third bedroom.

Father hired a bulldozer and driver to cut large terraces into the hill and improve the access. As soon as the earthworks were complete tree ferns began popping out from all the newly cut terrace banks and their glorious garden of later years began. Mother and father spent every spare moment from then until the house was sold in 1997 in their delightful garden. Mother conceived the ideas and father carried out the heavy work such as fashioning stone steps leading from terrace to terrace and developing garden beds in the heavy clay soil. Although mother was small in stature she was very strong and worked tirelessly beside father to realise their dream.

The Seventh Day Adventist school was also just off Blackwood Avenue and so we continued our lovely walks to and from school in this picturesque town. Blackwood Avenue has since been closed due to a landslide taking several houses.

When I continued my education after 6th grade at the local Central School Ruth was moved to the State school where Bruce had begun his education. After two years at the local Central School it was up at the crack of dawn to board the bus for the one hour trip to Lilydale High School.