

NINETY MILE DESERT

I believe the umbilical cord is cut twice in life for men. Once at birth and again when one's father dies. It is only after the death of a father that a son feels really on his own. No longer is there a *strength* to turn to for guidance.

I shall never forget the day my father died. He had been physically weakened when he had a lung collapsed after contracting tuberculosis at the age of only 35. He had recovered remarkably well and within two years went back to work, putting in long hours all through WWII guiding the vital aluminium industry that produced the raw materials necessary for the British to defend Great Britain, and with our US allies, defeat the Fascists.

During the war my father lived in a Grosvenor House Hotel flat that overlooked Hyde Park. During the night he had to do duty as a night watchman on the roof, like the other guests of the hotel. The Germans used to drop thousands of incendiary bombs on London on their nightly raids. These would set roofs on fire and actually caused more damage than the big explosive bombs. Whole streets could be burnt out because there were never enough fire engines to cope.

The incendiary bomb looked like a roll of chocolate biscuits. The watchman had a broom handle with a claw on the end with which they could grab the bomb and plunge it into a bucket of water. The only thing my father ever mentioned about this experience on the hotel roof was his horror at the sight of London burning. When the searchlight beams found a German plane the whole of Hyde Park exploded with the ack-ack guns firing off tracer shells trying to shoot them down.

My mother always said that she had been very lucky as her three sons had been too young to serve in the forces during the war, unlike so many of her friends who had lost either a husband or a son and sometimes both. She was ten when the Great War started and her two older brothers had fought in France. As she was 18 years younger than her sister and the only one left at home her mother used to make her read the 'Reported Missing' announcements in *The Times* every day to see if her brothers had been killed in action. Having experienced that as a child, I am not surprised she felt so lucky about her own children in WWII. Both her brothers survived the Great War although Uncle Pat was so badly gassed in the trenches that he had to spend the rest of his life farming at high altitude in Rhodesia.

I heard of my father's death when I was a farmer in South Australia. My brother, Mike, rang to tell me that he had died in London from a sudden heart attack. I was desperately sorry to lose my father, but since his death I have always felt his presence beside me.

I am sure that it was then somewhere deep inside me that I started down the road that led me to becoming a sculptor. I also fear that possibly, if my father had lived another ten years, I would never have made that journey, as I needed to be flying solo. However, my one regret in life has been that I was unable to share with him the joy that sculpting has brought to me, as I was able to with my mother, although he did share the *Hula Hula Girl* with a big bosom and a grass skirt. When I brought her home my father asked, with a big smile on his face, "Can anyone actually get into that position?" When I look at her she always reminds me of his comment!

I have many fond memories of my father, although far too few because of being sent to Australia for three years aged five during WWII, then being

packed off to boarding school on my return aged eight. As my father worked in the City and we lived in the country during the holidays we were literally ships passing in the night for most of my youth. As soon as the war was over he had to spend six months of each year in Australia rebuilding the mining industry, so I grew up not really knowing him at all.

I remember being very excited one Christmas when he came home from Australia, because he had gone to a shoe shop in Melbourne and bought several pairs for us boys using paper outlines of our feet. None of them fitted very well, but having a new pair of shoes was a great treat as they were hard to come by in England after the war and needed clothing coupons.

I didn't spend any time alone with my father until he bought the farm for me in the Ninety Mile Desert of South Australia. When I was growing up, there was an occasional holiday when he was able to join my mother and me, but they were few and far apart. Sometimes the family was together over the weekend, but it was seldom that there were five of us sitting around the dining-room table. When it happened, it was always fun and the conversation bursting with laughter. I was terribly fortunate to have such a very happy and harmonious family.

Pat was at Cambridge so his holidays didn't coincide with mine. Besides, he was eight years older and a 19-year-old university student doesn't want to talk to an 11-year-old Prep schoolboy. I used to think he was terrifyingly clever until I dropped my wristwatch and it stopped. He claimed that he could fix it and popped the back off. After a bit of fiddling he put the back on again and reported that it was mended. When I pointed out that there were still some bits left on the table, he blandly announced that they weren't necessary! Of course the watch didn't work and I decided that perhaps after all he wasn't quite so clever. He painted my portrait soon after that event which entailed sitting for hours when I wanted to be outside. Pat was a very good artist and when I moved into the house on my farm I commissioned him to do some watercolours of Chute Standen to hang on the walls.

Our relationship took a turn for the worse when I discovered some classical records. The gramophone was enormous and played the old type of records that were a foot in diameter. My mother had loved to dance in her youth, so most of the records were foxtrots by composers like Cole Porter and Irving Berlin. I often heard long stories from her about how she and my father used to go dancing at the Savoy to the music of Carol Gibbons and his band and tales of the Saturday night special at the Berkeley Hotel where, for a guinea a head, you could dine and dance until dawn! She told me that once she danced with Irving Berlin on the *Queen Mary* when he was trying out a new tune during a voyage to New York!

We always had music in the house when my mother was around. She would come into the sitting room and ask me to put on some records. The machine took six discs so played for half an hour and my love of romantic melodies comes from that time. After dinner our family would play cards and I would stack the gramophone up with records, so we had background music throughout the evening. There were two piles of records with about 50 in each pile and the system was to work down through one pile and then start on the other. It would take a couple of weeks to get through both piles before starting all over again. Four particular tunes stick in my mind.

The first was titled, *Three little fishes and a mummy fish too*. The song is about fish that all lived happily in a pond until, *Stop said the mummy fish or you'll get lost*,

but the three little fish didn't want to be bossed, so they swam and they swam, right over the dam. Another song went, *I was watching a man paint a fence, he painted it blue, like the blue of your eyes, like the blue of the skies, bluer than bluer than blue.* The third was a song called *Transatlantic Lullaby*. I have asked many dance band conductors if they knew the tune, but none ever has, which is a great shame, as it is the most beautiful melody I have ever heard and one I still hum.

The song, *Brother can you spare a dime*, made a lasting impression on me. Quite recently Margie and I were watching a New York ballet company on TV and one of the dances was choreographed to this song. Margie was astounded that after 50 years I could sing along word perfect. Our recording was by Bing Crosby and is utterly heartbreaking as it is about a returned soldier from the Great War during the 1930 Depression. It has the saddest lyrics that have ever been written and goes like this:

Once in khaki suits gee we looked swell
Full of that Yankee doodle dee dum.
Half a million boots slogging through hell
And I was the kid with the drum!
Say don't you remember they called me Al,
It was Al all the way.
Say don't you remember, I'm your Pal,
Brother, can you spare a dime?

One day I found some old giant records in a cupboard under the gramophone, so of course I had to play them. One of the records turned out to be Dame Nellie Melba singing *Land of Hope and Glory*. I loved it and thought that it was the best thing I had ever heard, so played it on every possible occasion. Pat didn't object to the music at first, but said he didn't want to hear it ten times a day. After several threats of dire consequences, eventually he couldn't stand it any more and broke it over my head! This hurt as it was made of very tough Bakelite. Thus ended my classical music interest until Margie and I bought a *Reader's Digest* album of popular classical symphonies when we were first married and we came to know about the music that we now love.

I have already written of how my parents adored going to musicals such as *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Oklahoma*, and *South Pacific*. When I was about 14 we went to one called *Irma La Douce* about artists living in Paris between the wars. One of the songs in the show made an enormous impression on me and the memory of it has stuck with me all my life. The theme phrase was, *If you want to have a wonderful life, be an artist*, sung and danced by a chorus of cancan girls and painters. I know that that sounds like 'being smart after the event', but I promise that it is true and I can hum the tune right now.

Being the youngest I was always made to have my bath before Mike. One summer evening I forgot to let the bathwater out so Mike grabbed me and locked me in the bathroom saying that he would not let me out until I had pulled out the plug. I thought this was rather an excessive threat for a minor crime, so I climbed out the bathroom window and down the drainpipe. He was furious to find me sitting by the fire when he came downstairs to explain that he was going to be late for dinner because I was still in the bathroom.

In fact I do believe that as a family we all got along very well and there were hardly any serious family rows. I suppose Pat and Mike did their own thing, while I amused myself around the farm and fell in love with being

outside in the fresh air. This early way of life certainly led to my becoming a jackeroo in Australia, which in turn led to my father buying me the 1,600-acre block of semi-developed land in the Ninety Mile Desert near Keith, a small town on the border of Victoria and South Australia.

During the Christmas holidays after New Zealand my father was repeatedly heard to mutter things like, "When is the boy going to settle down?" I had been jackerooing around Australia having fun for five years, but I believe he knew that he didn't have much time left on earth and so would like to see me settled before too long. He had heard about a land development scheme from a business colleague and suggested that I should take a job with the man running it. As he would be allowed to write off some of the costs of developing virgin scrub against his income tax, it seemed to him a golden opportunity to stop my roaming and force me to settle.

He suggested that I worked for the land developer who had a property near Keith called Desert Downs and in my spare time I explored the country on a scooter. As a Director of the AMP he arranged for me to meet the manager of the company's Land Development Scheme, Noel Gowing, who kindly asked me to dinner one night. I drove over on my motor scooter and had a very pleasant meal, but oh was it cold returning home as the frosts at Keith were quite arctic. I got on well with Noel and I told him that I wished to settle in the area and was looking for a small block of land. Some days later Noel left a message for me suggesting that we should meet because he had a property to show me that he thought might be suitable.

On my day off I drove over to his office and he showed me where the property was on a map and said that the AMP had decided to sell the block and planned to advertise it in two weeks' time. He suggested that he should take me to see it straight away and if I liked the land he recommended that I should buy it, as it was in a very good area 25 miles south of Keith with nice neighbours. In addition the AMP would advance me a loan to purchase it if I was interested. It all sounded too good to be true!

We set off in his Land Rover to see the property. The block ran north-south along the west side of the Black Range in the Hundred of Willalooka. Most of the property was virgin scrub that ran along a range that was about 100 feet higher than the surrounding countryside. The 600 acres of flat land on the west side of the range had been seeded with pasture.

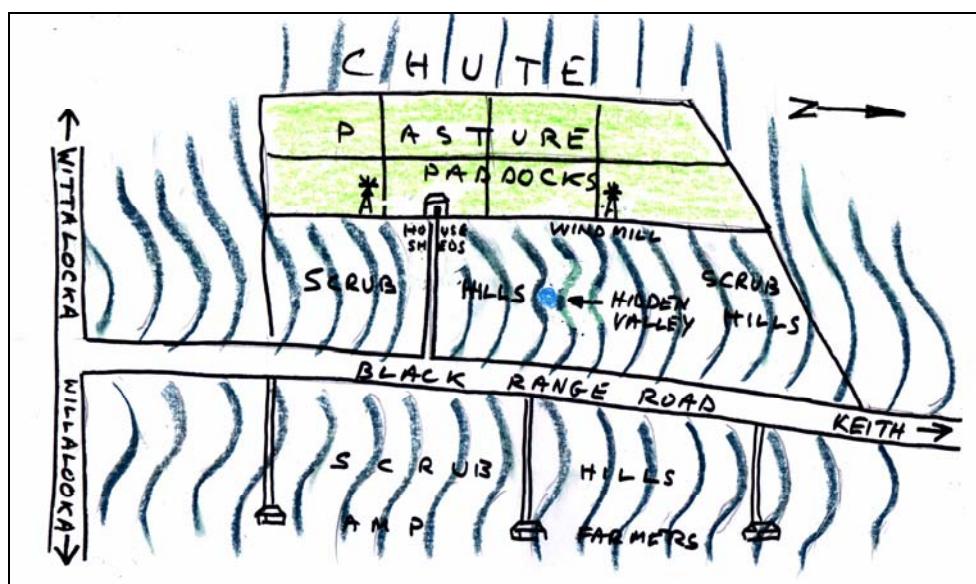
It was a beautiful block and I fell in love with it straight away. The pasture had never been stocked, so the grass and clover were thick on the ground. The area was studded with small gums that would provide plenty of shade for the stock in the summer. The ground was not nearly as sandy as I had found on other properties that I had visited and the dark green of the mallee scrub along the low range of hills gave the property a character that most of the country in the Ninety Mile Desert lacked. We went up onto the high ground for an overall look and when there I discovered a hidden valley and a clump of big old gum trees around a tiny water soak that had made their growth possible. The block was fenced so could carry stock immediately and Noel said that if we wished to purchase the land he would put down two wells for me as part of the deal, so stock water would not be a problem. The property had an air of romance about it and I wanted it.

What to do? I had only two weeks in which to ask my father if buying this block was in any way possible, but he was in England. I decided that the first thing to do was to talk to WS and ask his advice. I rang my friend, Jim, the

chauffeur, and told him I would be taking the train to Melbourne that night and asked him if it would be possible to meet me and if I could borrow an office car to go out and see WS in the morning.

Faithful Jim was there to meet me when the train arrived in Melbourne at six o'clock in the morning and I drove out to WS's little horse farm at Keilor. As nothing was stirring in the house I waited in the car watching the back door. Eventually WS came out for his morning walk with Winston, the Boxer dog Churchill had given him.

After a surprised greeting I told him I needed his advice. He invited me to walk with him and I explained about the block of land and how I had fallen in love with it. I asked if he thought I was crazy or should I ring my father and ask him if it would be possible to buy it? By the time we got back to the house he advised me to call my father and tell him everything I had told him and, no, he didn't think I was crazy, as long as I didn't ask him for help as he was broke!



Map of 'Chute' and the 'Black Range Road' to Keith

I rang my father as advised and he told me to go ahead and get all the paperwork involving the sale sent to him in London. He also asked me to draw up a budget for the things that I would have to do before the property could carry any stock. This would include a tin shed to live in, two windmills with tanks, troughs and some sheep yards. He went on to say that I had better get myself a solicitor in Adelaide!

I rushed home and went to see Noel and told him what my father had said. He seemed genuinely pleased and wished me luck and promised to attend to the paperwork and have it forwarded to London. I resigned my job and took the train to Adelaide to see Sir Keith Angas, who had acted as my guardian when I was at Roseworthy, and asked him if he could recommend a solicitor. He very kindly introduced me to his own solicitor and also his accountant. Talk about growing up in a hurry! One week ago I had been a carefree jackeroo and now I was a property owner trapped in the world of solicitors, accountants, budgets and bank loans!

My father had also told me to buy a VW car. I went to see the dealers and came away with a beautiful steely-blue Beetle, which I drove back to Keith.

I found lodgings with Michael and Sybella Aldersey, who owned the farm to the west of my block, while I planned and then erected a corrugated iron tractor shed with a 10 by 20-foot rectangular room at one end in which I could live. I bought an ancient Ford kerosene tractor with a starting handle that had a kick like a mule and an old four-wheel trailer.

Deciding where the house would be built one day was the greatest fun and having done that I chose a spot for the shed, the sheep yards and the future shearing shed. This determined where the drive would be and the front gate, so I needed a name for the property as I couldn't just go on calling it The Block. The name I chose was Chute Standen, after the farm in England where I had spent so many happy years. I later shortened it to just plain Chute to keep things simple.

The drive ran straight in at right angles from the road over the Black Range and down to a lovely grove of gum trees that one day would shelter the tractor shed and the sheep yards. Just beyond the trees a raised tongue of land pushed out into the pasture and I chose this spot as the site for the homestead. The view was superb, as it looked north up the pasture running along the range. It was high enough to be above the morning fog that sometimes settled over the pasture, leaving the tops of the gums floating like little green islands on a sea of glistening white cotton wool. The sunsets from this spot were amongst the best I have ever seen anywhere in the world.

Noel had fulfilled his promise and arranged for two bores to be drilled. One was near the future house site and the other at the northern end of the property. I had windmills erected to pump the water into large tanks. The water was all right for stock but far too salty for humans to drink.

I soon had the tractor shed built out of corrugated-iron sheets – six ten-foot bays with the last one being entirely enclosed to make a workshop, which would be my living quarters until the house was built. I dislike the normal look of sheet iron with the corrugations running vertically so I used the iron on its side making the ridges run horizontally. I suppose this was the beginning of my becoming artistically pig-headed! The finished shed looked well and much more like a proper building with horizontal courses. As this was the first shed I had ever built I was rather proud of it and couldn't wait to move into my new quarters. Of course everyone asked me why I hadn't built it properly, but I still maintain that it was the best-looking shed in the district!

I had decided that when I built a house, rather than having a wood-burning stove, I would have a bottled-gas oven. I bought one and installed it in my quarters in the shed. The water from the roof was caught in two 2,000-gallon sheet iron tanks so I had everything I needed. I piped bore water to the shed and built a furnace under a 44-gallon oil drum to feed a shower that hung from a gum tree. It worked well enough but it took ages to heat the water so many more quick cold showers were taken than hot ones.

The Ninety Mile Desert was deficient in the small amounts of copper and zinc that are necessary for plant growth, which was why it had not been developed in the past. When it was discovered that the chemicals made the land productive the AMP insurance company decided to develop the area and settle it with farmers. The Government encouraged this sort of thing in those days as Australia was still a primary producing country and, apart from minerals, wool and wheat were its main source of income.

Now came the time to show my father what he had paid for. I hoped he would approve and I looked forward to sharing it all with him the next time he

came to Australia. He used to fly to Adelaide quite often on business so on one of these visits he arranged to return to Melbourne by train, disembarking at Keith so he could spend a couple of days with me for his first visit to Chute. The appointed day arrived and I went to meet the train at Keith railway station. The first thing to do was to take my father to meet Noel as he wished to thank him for all he had done for me. Noel very kindly lent us his Land Rover so I could show my father all over Chute, as the VW Beetle couldn't be taken out onto the pasture because of all the rocks and stumps I had yet to clear.

What a day we had together! I made some toast for lunch and warmed up some soup on the new gas stove and we ate sitting at the workbench that I had made in my living quarters in the tin shed. We examined the proposed house site and looked at some plans I had brought from a newspaper advertisement. It was a dear little house and I have yet to find a better design for a bungalow.

The plan showed a lovely big sitting room with an open-plan kitchen off it and three little bedrooms. The whole of the north-facing front of the house was lined with six-foot high windows except for a wooden panel by the front door and the wall of the chimney. The entire sitting-room wall opposite the windows and fireplace was lined with the same timber as the outside wall by the front door. It was a perfectly planned 900-square-foot house and was relatively cheap to construct.

I decided to build the house using white Mt Gambier limestone blocks, the local building material. The stone can be cut with a wood saw and comes in blocks one foot high and two foot long and four inches thick. As the site was still covered with scrub we had to do a bit of guessing as to where exactly the house would be, nevertheless we paced out the approximate area and put in markers for the corners, both getting more excited by the moment. As there was only one camp bed in my shed and no plumbing, I had booked us both into the local motel where we had a brilliant dinner talking together for the first time ever and I fell asleep content, having discovered my father to be a warm friend. Next day we explored other farms around the country and both decided that Chute was the prettiest block we had seen. In all my years at Keith I never saw a block of land that compared with it for beauty.

During his few brief visits to the farm I got to know my father and we had fantastic times together. He loved the property and was interested in everything I was doing and incredibly supportive. There were only three years between his first visit and his premature death aged only 56, but they were some of the happiest years of my life as we built a marvellous father-son relationship. What he did for me was so generous and it made possible everything else that has followed for which I shall be eternally grateful.

The time came for my father to leave after his first visit. He had arranged for Jim to drive up from Melbourne to collect him as he had an aversion to travelling by train. This aversion had started on a superb holiday that my mother had taken us on to Italy when I was aged 12, one in which trains and my father had played an important part. My mother, with Pat and me, had driven down to Forte dei Marmi in our old Humber Snipe on one of her typical exciting holiday adventures.

At the end of the war there were no commercial airlines to Australia so my father created one by buying a Lancaster bomber and fitting it out to carry six passengers. He called it Silver City Airline, after the Broken Hill mines.

The ship voyage to Australia took six weeks, but the Lancaster could do it in six days! The route required going down through Africa and across the Indian Ocean and refuelling on Christmas Island. It was a long journey, but the plane had beds, a kitchen and even a shower! The following year the Lancaster was replaced by a Skymaster, which had a much better range, so they were able to fly via India and do the trip in three days. Within a couple of years airlines had opened up routes between the USA and Australia and he was able to fly commercially, making the plane and pilot no longer necessary.

The pilot, who had been a bomber commander, decided to take over Silver City Airline and start a cross-channel route between Lymph in England and Le Touquet in France. The fleet consisted of two old Bristol Freighters that took two cars at a time.

During the Battle of Britain, Lymph was a Spitfire base situated on top of the White Cliffs of Dover. It was designed for fighters and not for clumsy Bristol freighters. Come the day of our flight we were driven down to Lymph by Studley, one of the farm hands. The poor man had been designated to look after the car and drive us to Italy! The French also had petrol rationing, like the English, and were being very tight about giving coupons to visiting foreigners. To take as much fuel on board as possible, we filled up with petrol before arriving at the terminal that was a converted air-raid shelter.

While the cars were being loaded the Customs men insisted on searching our luggage. Of course they discovered my mother's jewellery and to her fury confiscated it, saying they didn't trust her not to sell it abroad. There were heated words with my mother ending on a gibe about the Nazis having landed in England after all, none of which helped matters in the least!

We boarded the plane and took our places in canvas seats that were only clipped to the floor because they had to be removed to get the two cars on and off. The engines sprang into life when all was ready for the 20-minute flight across the Channel and with the plane vibrating alarmingly, we taxied across the grass field to the furthest point from the cliff edge. The engine roar became louder and louder and when the brakes were released we shot off across the grass taking off just before reaching the edge of the cliff which was fortunate, as the drop was straight into the sea 300 feet below.

We arrived safely after what I thought was a very exciting trip, although I am not sure anyone else agreed. The smell of petrol from the car's over-full fuel tanks didn't add to a feeling of safety. It was on this journey that my mother told me that she hadn't been to Le Touquet since I had been born, at the same time as telling me about her disappointment of my not being a girl! Was she trying to get something off her conscience before it was too late?

That was the beginning of a long trip down to Forte dei Marmi via Paris and Lake Como as there were no dual-carriageways in those days. It had been arranged that my father would travel down by train to Milan and join us at the lake. When he arrived he announced that he was never going in a train again as the trip had been a nightmare. We stayed at the Villa d'Este and the three of us had a very happy time. I shall never forget it because every day we went out in the hotel row boat and I had to do the rowing!

After a week we drove from Lake Como to Forte dei Marmi and stayed in a hotel where many years later, when Margie and I also used it, the manager showed me my father's signature in the old Register. In 1948 the hotel bill was paid in very large Italian notes and by large I mean not only in nomination, but also in length. The Italian 10,000-lira note in those days was over a foot long!

Because of the currency restrictions after the war a barter trade had sprung up whereby the English paid for the school fees of Italian students and their parents paid our hotel bills in Italy. The system worked very well most of the time, but occasionally things went wrong and we were part of such an event. Our student was a very beautiful, bubbly girl named Carlotta who had been to stay with my parents in England. One evening she came to the hotel with her boyfriend for a drink to deliver the money needed to pay the hotel bill. Carlotta said she had forgotten to bring the envelope of money, but would return with it the following day. The fact that the money had been in an envelope turned out to be the problem as she had posted some mail in a letterbox for her mother on the way. Well, you can guess what happened, *but* can you imagine the postman's face when he cleared the mailbox?

When my father came to pay the bill at the hotel he found that he still did not have enough money, even though Carlotta had by then delivered a second envelope. However, fortunately he had the return railway ticket from Pisa to London and luckily, by selling it to the manager at a considerable loss, he was able to make up the difference on the bill. He solved the problem of how to get home by having the Silver City Dove fly down and collect him from Pisa.

My father's favourite story was about a train trip a friend of his made on the Canadian Pacific. During the trip his friend had been eaten alive by bed bugs and when he arrived in Vancouver he wrote a stinging letter to the president of the Rail Company, complaining bitterly. Duly he received a letter back from the president apologising profusely and thanking him for letting him know the carriage number which had enabled the company to withdraw the carriage from service, fumigate the interior and burn the mattresses. The president's letter went on to say that it was only with the help of people reporting faults that the company could maintain the railway at the highest possible standard of cleanliness, so he would sincerely like to thank him for this act of public responsibility. My father's friend was flattered when he read the letter, but then he found his own letter attached to the back and across it was scrawled, *Send this damn fool the bed bug letter!*

My life has been dictated by lucky chances, but the best one of all was about to happen to me. While I was jackingerooing in New Zealand my parents had attended a business dinner party in Melbourne where my mother had sat beside Ken Begg, who was then Chairman of ICI, Australia. Ken told my mother during the meal that he and his wife had been touring Europe with their children, Michael and Margaret, and had left them behind to work in London for a year. My mother asked Ken for Margaret's address and promised to invite her down to the farm in Wiltshire for the weekend.

This she duly did and at the same time asked my Australian girlfriend, Margie Edwards, thinking that the girls would be good company for each other in a house full of older people. Margie Edwards was the girl whom I had met after my Tiger Moth experience when I returned to Sydney. We had liked each other and had continued to write ever since that meeting.

I later learnt that when they met in England Miss Edwards showed Miss Begg a photograph of me, which is how the latter came to know of my existence. I distinctly remember receiving a letter from my father in which he

mentioned that they had had a beautiful redhead to stay for the weekend, although Miss Begg doesn't believe me!

The Olympic Games were held in Melbourne in 1956. I had been asked to go to one or two events and also to some of the cocktail parties held over that period. It was at one of these that I first met Margie Begg who had just arrived back from England. I had come with a party of friends for a drink before going on somewhere to eat and just as we were leaving I passed a very good-looking redhead talking to a man as they stood by the right of a fireplace. The girl stopped me and said, "I think you are John Robinson. I am Margie Begg and I have just been staying with your parents." I admitted that I was indeed John but said, "I can't talk right now as my friends are waiting for me, but I hope that we shall meet again." Margie's version of that conversation is that I said, "Oh! Give me a ring sometime," to which she replied, "I don't ring men up," but I really don't think I could have been that rude!

The lucky thing was that she had recognised me from a photograph she had seen when staying with my parents. She told me later that she nearly hadn't come to the party as she hadn't been invited. Thank goodness her brother persuaded her that it would be all right.

Margie reported my being in Melbourne to her parents and they insisted that I should be invited to their home as my parents had been so kind to her in England and had her to stay as well as giving her a 21st birthday party. The Begg family lived only a short walk away from the house used by my parents when they were in Melbourne after moving out of Menzies Hotel. I was able to stay at my parents' house when they were away, as there was a permanent caretaker there called Marianna. Soon after meeting Margie at the cocktail party Mrs Begg telephoned and invited me to dinner.

On the morning of the dinner date I had to go into town and collect something from Lorna Hegarty, my father's secretary, at the ZC office in Collins Street. Dear little Lorna was tiny and hardly came up to my father's waist, but he said she was the best secretary he had ever had. She and I were friends and she helped me many times over the years.

After talking to Lorna I crossed over the road and went into the bar of Capers restaurant for a cup of coffee and found an American sailor doing the same thing. The citizens of Melbourne had been asked over the radio to befriend the visiting US servicemen during the Olympic Games, so I started to talk to him and found out that he was from the giant aircraft carrier moored in Williamstown harbour. During our conversation I asked him if he was having a good time in Australia and he said he was but he was a bit disappointed because he had not yet seen a kangaroo.

I was at a loose end so offered to take him out to Healesville Zoo where he would not only see a kangaroo, but also emus and koalas and, as he said he would love to do this, we set out in my little car. The afternoon was a great success and the sailor turned out to be an extremely interesting person to talk to, as at this time of my life I knew nothing about America. When we returned to Melbourne in the afternoon I asked him what he was going to do for the rest of the evening. He answered that he was just going to walk around town until ten o'clock when he was due back on board. I decided to ring Mrs Begg, explain the situation and ask if I could bring him to dinner with me that evening, to which she probably agreed because his presence would make for more conversation since none of the Begg family had met me!

We arrived at the Beggs' house and the American sailor proved to be a great asset to the conversation while we ate a delicious dinner that started with oysters on the shell. Now if you haven't seen oysters before they do come as a bit of a surprise and they certainly were to the poor sailor. When his plate was removed the cook found an oyster carefully parked under each shell, although how he did that without anyone seeing is a mystery. The time came to leave and take him back to his aircraft carrier, but as neither of us had any idea where the harbour was Margie very kindly offered to show us the way to Williamstown, where the ship was berthed.

The three of us got into the little car and set off with the sailor in the back seat. Where Toorak Road meets St Kilda Road there is a set of traffic lights that were red, so I slowed down. Just before we stopped the lights changed to green and we started forward again when suddenly a man ran out from the pavement pulling a woman by the hand. I slammed on the brakes and missed the couple by inches, but by then cars were coming up the other side of the road. The girl panicked, pulled loose from the man, turned back fell and onto the rear mudguard of our car. The sailor and I leapt out and ran around the back of the car to find the poor girl lying in the road.

Fortunately a policeman had seen the whole thing and had immediately rung for an ambulance, which arrived in minutes as a hospital was just around the corner. The ambulance man assured the policeman and us that the girl was only shaken and not injured. As I didn't have my licence on me the policeman said I would have to report to the local police station next morning and show it to the officer in charge, but reassured me by saying that I was not to blame and he would say so in his report. We got back into our car and drove very slowly to the ship, feeling pretty shaken.

We said goodbye to the sailor and returned to Margie's home, where the two of us talked for hours. The accident had made a bond between us and any shyness had disappeared. As she had just been to my home in England she had lots of first-hand news, which was nice for by then I had been away from England for nearly six years and I suddenly found myself missing my childhood home. I am sure that if I hadn't brought the sailor to dinner and the accident hadn't happened I would never have got to know what a wonderful person Margie was. We said goodnight and I left, promising to report what occurred at the police station.

Next morning the police told me that the girl had not even been admitted to the hospital and that I was not to worry about the accident. I called Margie and told her the good news and thanked her mother for the wonderful dinner, which is when I heard about the oysters under the shells!

I saw Margie several times during the Olympic Games at various parties and we became friends. I wanted to see the film that had just been released called *Lady and the Tramp* and I asked her if she would like to come with me. She said she would but unfortunately she was going to a wedding reception at Menzies Hotel on that particular day. I persuaded her that the reception would nearly be over by five o'clock, so if I collected her then we would be able to catch the five thirty show. Luckily she agreed to this plan and I was waiting in the hotel foyer at the appointed hour.

I knew all the staff at Menzies from the days when my father had lived there. The company had used the apartment for years and I remember staying there myself when I was waiting to catch the ship home with Mike and Nana in 1943. I owned two pet lizards that lived in a shoebox and because I wasn't

allowed to take them on the ship I had to release them on the roof outside the apartment windows before leaving. I wonder if their offspring are still living under the tiles?

Margie and I both loved the film, but more than that I realised while sitting beside her that I had never felt so comfortable with another person in my whole life. I was also feeling very sorry for myself as I thought that this would be the last time we would have an opportunity to be together. My parents were due to arrive in Melbourne and I would have to go with them for the Christmas holiday as they had rented the house on Mt Macedon again. After the film I took Margie back to her home and we said goodbye. On our parting Margie said that she would always think of me as *Tramp* and I am afraid the name has stuck.

My mother had become very fond of Margie Begg in London and when she found out that she was going to turn 21 she and her friend, Nancy, organised a party for her. It was therefore natural that when my father rented the house for Christmas my mother would invite her to come up for a weekend to stay with us, all unbeknown to me.

After I had met Miss Edwards in Sydney we had continued to write so when she told me that she was going to England for a year I had asked my mother to look after her. My mother had asked her down to Chute Standen for several weekends and it was on one of those visits that the two Margies met. Margie Edwards and I had kept in touch by mail and when she returned to Sydney I had been asked up to stay with her parents, and we had sort of drifted into becoming a couple.

The problem was that I had asked Miss Edwards to come down to Macedon from Sydney for the same weekend that my mother had invited Miss Begg. When I objected about this arrangement my mother said that it would be fun as the two girls knew each other, having met in England the year before. Of course my mother didn't know how I was beginning to feel about Margie Begg and I could foresee problems arising.

I was right! I remember the weekend very clearly as I now thought Miss Begg was a very attractive girl and this fact became obvious to Miss Edwards, who laid into me for paying too much attention to the wrong Margie, because I had taken her for a walk to show her the koalas in the gum forest while she was resting!

It was soon after this difficult weekend that I went to Keith and started working in the Ninety Mile Desert with the idea of looking for land to develop. When I found the block in the Ninety Mile Desert, Margie Edwards and I announced our engagement and Margie Begg went out of my life.

As Chute would be our home it was time that my fiancée came down to have a look at where I expected her to live. This she did, staying with my old boss at Desert Downs for a couple of days as she couldn't stay in my shed. When she came with me to the property she seemed as excited as I was about the future and liked the site I had chosen for the house, even though at this stage it was just a big bare patch of bulldozed limestone.

A month later I drove up to Sydney for our engagement party and on the night I arrived we went out to dinner and she told me that she couldn't marry me. She said that it was nothing to do with me personally, but she could never live in the Ninety Mile Desert. I didn't argue, but of course was terribly hurt. We went to see her parents and both felt very sad and tearful. Next morning I set off for the 500-mile drive back to Chute alone in my little VW beetle. By

the time I had reached the Blue Mountains outside Sydney the hurt had gone and I was singing. I shall never be able to thank Margie Edwards enough for releasing me from my promise. When I think of all the things that would not have happened I go quite numb at the knees.

On my return to Keith I threw myself into farm work. My parents were very understanding and my father told me to carry on and build the house. I started looking around for a builder and eventually found one who seemed keen to do the job. He had two workmen to help him, one named Mr Crabtree and the other an Italian, who of course was called Angelo. I took the builder down to Adelaide to sign the contract in front of my newly-acquired solicitor and we ordered all the material and dug out the trenches for the foundations. When the concrete was poured the house looked tiny, being even smaller than the shed I had built. However, everything seemed to be going well and I was very excited by the idea of having my own home, but I should not have counted my chickens before the eggs had hatched!

The builder suddenly announced that he was quitting and was returning to Sydney. What to do? I had some foundations but no house. Fortunately I had only paid for the material used so I was not out of pocket. It was then that Mr Crabtree and Angelo stepped forward and said that they would like to take over the contract and finish the house for me. But there was a problem as they didn't have any transport, the original contractor having left with the truck they had used to get back and forth to Keith where they were camped.

The best way to solve the problem was to give Mr Crabtree an advance on the house so he could buy a small second-hand truck. When he returned to the farm I was horrified to see he had bought a brand new truck! When I asked him how he had been able to afford it he told me that he had bought it on hire purchase. I should have heard warning bells ringing then, but this was my first experience of dealing with builders.

The house slowly took shape with first the timber walls quickly followed by the roof of slate-blue sheeting. Soon plaster board covered the walls and I could walk from room to room on wooden floors! When Mr Crabtree and Angelo finally finished I had a wonderful house to live in. The only problem was they were well over budget.

As time went by I had been getting steadily more worried about costs. I paid for all the materials myself so knew Mr Crabtree and Angelo's profit was disappearing. The final straw arrived when Angelo appeared with a new car as well, again bought on hire purchase. When the time came for settlement there was no profit margin for Mr Crabtree and Angelo after paying all the building supplier's accounts.

I rang my father for his advice and he told me to pay them each a bonus above the agreed price and wish them on their way. He also gave me a piece of advice that I have followed ever since, "As you have to live there, make sure that all the local people are fully paid."

Over the months I had become very friendly with the two men and they had done a wonderful job for me. I could not have been more pleased with my little house and I would like to thank them now, wherever they are. They taught me how to build and when the time came for me to add on a nursery wing with a guest bedroom and bathroom, I was able to do this by myself, but was greatly helped by having the solid little house to lean my timber extension against so it would not blow away.

The next trip that my father made to Chute was with my mother and this became one of the highlights of my life. They flew in on the company's plane as they were on a business trip between Broken Hill and Melbourne and the farm was on the way. The pilot had found a sheep station not far from me with an airstrip long enough for the plane to land on. What the pilot hadn't been told was that very tall gum trees surrounded the field!

The pilot did a couple of passes over the strip to inspect it before he was satisfied that a landing was possible. Luckily there was a good headwind so he was able to come in only a few feet above the tree tops. The moment he touched the ground he slammed on the brakes with full reverse thrust, sending up a typhoon of dust. The plane pulled up and the door opened and out staggered my parents looking rather pale. The plane took off as soon as the cases were out and before the wind could change. We found out later that it was illegal for that size plane to land there! On the drive back to Chute they told me that they were a little nervous as they had just had a very scary experience in Queensland when one of the landing wheels of a commercial aeroplane had collapsed on touchdown, causing the plane to spin around on the runway!

When the three of us sat down to dinner on the first night my parents said that it was the first time that they had been the houseguests of one of their sons, which gave me a great thrill. They marked the event by presenting me with a visitors' book and were the first to sign it. The book stayed in use right up to the end of 1999.

My parents loved my little homestead. To be honest, homestead is rather a big word for such a small house, but it seemed spacious to me after living in a tin shed only 10 by 20 foot square. The three of us had a very happy time, planning what should be done with the interior of the house. Walls were measured for wallpaper, and floors for string mats, while various ideas were discussed about furniture to sit on and eat off.

My mother cooked our meals and my father had brought some tins of his favourite food, *pâté de foie gras*. I had purchased 300 ewes and 6 rams that I needed to separate as hopefully the boys had completed their task. I asked my father to help and it was wonderful to be pushing the sheep up the race and watch him work the drafting gates in the sheep yards, obviously loving it.

The time came for them to leave. My father announced that there was no way he was going to take off from the same strip. He had cancelled the plane and booked seats on the commercial airline from Naracoorte, our nearest official airstrip. I drove them down and waved goodbye. Driving back to Chute I felt very sad, but deep inside extremely happy and content.

My parents' visit was a turning point in my spirits and all sorts of things started to happen. Soon afterwards my father had walked past a second-hand furniture shop and had spotted some superb cane chairs and my mother had made covers for the cushions. She also sent up some floor matting, a dining table and two benches. I had had some bookshelves made, so when all this furniture was added, the sitting room was transformed.

Shortly after this my mother returned to stay with me for a week armed with rolls and rolls of wallpaper. She had taken lessons on how to hang paper after the war, when it was impossible to get house decorators. She assured me that it was easy and it turned out to be just that. Within a week we had the whole house papered and it looked magnificent although the place reeked of

glue. Painters came and did the ceilings in the sitting room but otherwise I tackled all the other paint work.



The sitting room with its cane furniture



'Gould' curtain material

I had seen some beautiful chintz material in a friend's house in Adelaide that was covered with birds painted by Gould. I had the material made up in floor to ceiling curtains that went the entire length of the sitting room and the effect was stunning when they were pulled.

It was a wonderfully productive time, for while I worked on the house the pregnant sheep grazed in the paddocks. We had good rains that year and

the pasture was blooming. The only eyesore was the lack of a garden as my delightful little house was surrounded by a barren waste of bare white limestone that threw off a blinding glare.

It was time to begin to cut the 600 acres of pasture up into paddocks by first fencing it across the middle into two paddocks. If only I had a dollar for every posthole I dug on the farm! It was not an easy job as the so-called good soil out on the flats was only a foot deep over limestone, the top six inches of which was as tough as flint. To help me I had an auger mounted on the back of the tractor with which I could drill the flint using a one-inch mining bit. Believe it or not, in those days one could buy gelignite in the local store! I rather enjoyed clamping on the detonator, lighting the fuse and waiting for the boom. It was hot work in the scorching sun and one soon learnt not to leave the iron crowbar lying on the ground, as it got red-hot. The worst fright I ever had in my life was when I went to pick up the crowbar and suddenly realised I was reaching for a six foot-long King Brown, one of Australia's nastier snakes. My fright didn't stop me from quickly dispatching the creature. I hate snakes!

Christmas had come around again and I went to Melbourne for a holiday with my parents. When I arrived in the city Margie Begg was very much on my mind, so one day I summoned up courage and left a note with a flower on her doorstep, asking how she was and telling her that my engagement was off. I learnt later that she had a lot of trouble reading my handwriting and had needed the aid of a friend to do so! I waited a day, then rang suggesting that we meet and have a picnic in the Botanical Gardens. Margie agreed telling me that she was working as the receptionist at the Dulux Paint Colour Centre just off Collins Street, but could get off for an hour at lunchtime.

I collected her and as I had promised to have her back by two o'clock on the dot we took a taxi to the gardens so we would have more time to eat our sandwiches before she had to return to work. I told her that we would probably have to hitchhike back, because it would be impossible to find a taxi passing the Gardens in the middle of the day. It was a particularly beautiful sunny day and we found a spot by the lake with a notice that read *Danger Deep Water*. We had a lovely half-hour and thank goodness she hadn't fallen in love with anyone else that year! Come quarter to two we were at the gate of the Gardens with our thumbs in the air looking for a lift. Much to my surprise and our good fortune a car stopped and gave us a ride into town!

Our meeting had been such a success I asked her if we could do it again and as she agreed, we had another happy sunny picnic at *DDW*. We walked back to the road and again stood thumbs up hoping to get a lift back into town. A car approached and pulled up, "Could you take us to Collins Street, please?" The obliging driver said, "Yes, I am going there myself." I kept a straight face for about one minute and then introduced Margie to Jim. What a laugh we all had. Jim and I had set the exact time for the pick-up and I knew he wouldn't let me down. I wasn't going to risk another chance pick-up. They were truly memorable and romantic days.

The Botanical Gardens became our courting spot and we return there whenever we are in Melbourne to give thanks for our joint luck in life of having met all those years ago. We would also sometimes go and have a meal at the fateful Capers restaurant, where I had met the US sailor who had played such a part in our first meeting and the accident that followed. It became our favourite restaurant as it had a sunny courtyard where we could sit outside.

Margie was asked to lots of parties, so when I was in town she would take me with her. This included a black-tie Government House ball where she wore a beautiful long yellow evening dress. Much to her sorrow I never did learn to waltz, but I often think of that evening as being sheer magic.

Margie's parents asked me to their seaside home. They were wonderful people and always so welcoming that I very quickly felt at home. Their house, Rannoch, was at Portsea near Sorrento and had been the holiday home of Ken Begg's mother and father when he was a boy. Ken grew up in Melbourne and went to MGS, but all of his boyhood had been spent at Portsea on the beach barefoot, swimming, sailing or fishing.

Margie's mother, Helen, was descended from an early settler called Thomas Raine, a sea captain who transported convicts to Australia in his brigantine *Surry*. Raine had become a captain at an early age because his skipper died on the voyage out to Australia. He had an illustrious career, found a passage through the Barrier Reef and discovered Raine Island. He also took cuttings from the willows planted around Napoleon's grave on the island of Saint Helena when taking on water during passage to Australia, and then planted them on his property near Bathurst in NSW.



'Helen Begg and Margie' aged two

Helen was one of the best-read people I have ever met and we had many fascinating conversations together. She and Ken both shared an earthy sense of humour so my weekend visits were full of laughter. Ken's favourite story was about the Night Soil collector who used to eat his bread and butter with his cup of tea as he sat up on top of the cans on his horse-drawn cart. One day he dropped one and was heard to say, *How lucky can you be, butter side up*. It became another one of our catch phrases, joining my father's *Bed Bug Letter*.

I was amazed to find that the tiny weatherboard cottage WS had added to Kilmarie for Mike and me in 1940 was still there and only six houses along the cliff from the Beggs' home. When we walked along the cliff I pointed it out to Margie. She was eight when she returned to Australia from New Zealand in 1943, so I must have left for England only a couple of months before she came

to live at Portsea! I find the coincidence of our nearly meeting all those years ago quite extraordinary.

On that same path along the cliff I was able to show Margie my Aunt Peg's house, Heron's Pest (the leg of the R had been missing for years). The house was halfway between Rannoch and Kilmarie and I had stayed there aged 17 while on holiday from Roseworthy Agriculture College when Margie was then living just two houses down the cliff!

I remember Kilmarie quite well, but especially the Christmas I arrived aged five as I was given a toy cargo boat that was driven by a clockwork engine. The ship was designed for 'pond use only' and not the 'open sea', but as there was no pond I was allowed to float it in the sea. Of course the engine got flooded and the spring soon rusted up.



Cloudberry, Dodder and Sneezwort loading the 'Jeanie Deans'

My little ship is mixed up in my memory with two of my favourite books, *The Little Grey Men* and *Down the Bright Stream* by BB, which are about the last gnomes to live in England. The gnomes discovered a toy clockwork driven cargo ship named *Jeanie Deans* and used it to navigate the waters of Folly Brook in search of their lost brother. Everyone who loves England should read these two books to their children, as they are utterly enchanting.

WS's house was bordered by big fir-tree hedges cut flat on the sides and top. As children Margie and her brother used to climb up on them and play on the top until they were seen by the gardener and ordered off.

By now I was head-over-heels in love and thankfully Margie was with me, so I asked her to come and visit Chute. Of course she had heard a lot about the farm from me, but before I could ask her to marry me I knew from experience that it was wise that she should see it with her own eyes. She was a city girl and had never lived in the country although she had friends who did and had stayed with them. However, they lived on old well-established

properties in the Western District or Gippsland, and the Ninety Mile Desert was a very different kettle of fish.

My brother, Mike and his wife, Bern, also wanted to see Chute, so I made a plan for them to come on the train and bring Margie. In those days young girls didn't stay with bachelors; however, if Mike and Bern arrived a day later no one would know! Margie caught the Melbourne-Adelaide Express to Keith and arrived at midnight. I drove her out to Chute in the little VW, travelling south along the bitumen road until we reached Gum Water Hole, forked right on to the gravel Black Range Road towards Chute.

I don't think I have ever been so excited or anxious in my life. I was taking the most beautiful girl in the world to see my home and prayed she would love it as much as I did. We arrived at my front gate and drove up over the range on the bumpy drive leading to my little white homestead.

Her first reaction to the inside of the house was magic. She loved it and wanted to see everything, but as it was by then two o'clock I tucked her up in the bedroom I used as an office.

At first light we were up and after breakfast I took her for a tour of the farm on my ancient blue Ford tractor. I showed her the shed where I had lived while the house was being built, and the dear girl was enthusiastic about everything she saw. The house was still sitting like a sore thumb on a white rock slab but I told her I planned to bring in some good soil and surround the house with a strawberry clover lawn. In those days she was not the devoted gardener that she now is, so there was no complaint about the lack of flowers. Talking about this time 45 years later I learnt that in fact she was a bit shocked by the barren paddocks, and thinking back I am not surprised!

That night we had a wonderful dinner by candlelight and then drove into Keith to collect Mike and Bern off the midnight train. The tiny house had never had so many people sleeping in it before as on that weekend. I can't remember much more about the visit except that I was walking on air and that the time for Margie's departure came far too quickly. Mike and Bern were going west to Adelaide, so I was able to be alone with Margie while we waited for the later east bound train to take her back to Melbourne. When it arrived I handed her up into the carriage and I felt as though half of me was leaving with her.

A few weeks after Margie's visit to Chute I went down to Portsea and asked her if she would marry me, and, thank goodness she said, "Yes." I then had to pluck up courage to ask her father for his daughter's hand. We went into the sitting room together after dinner and I asked him if I could come and see him in his office the next day. He burst out laughing, sent Margie and her mother out of the room, shut the door and sat me down for a ten-minute grilling. He then went to the door and called the girls in and said, "Well, I had better go and open some champagne!"

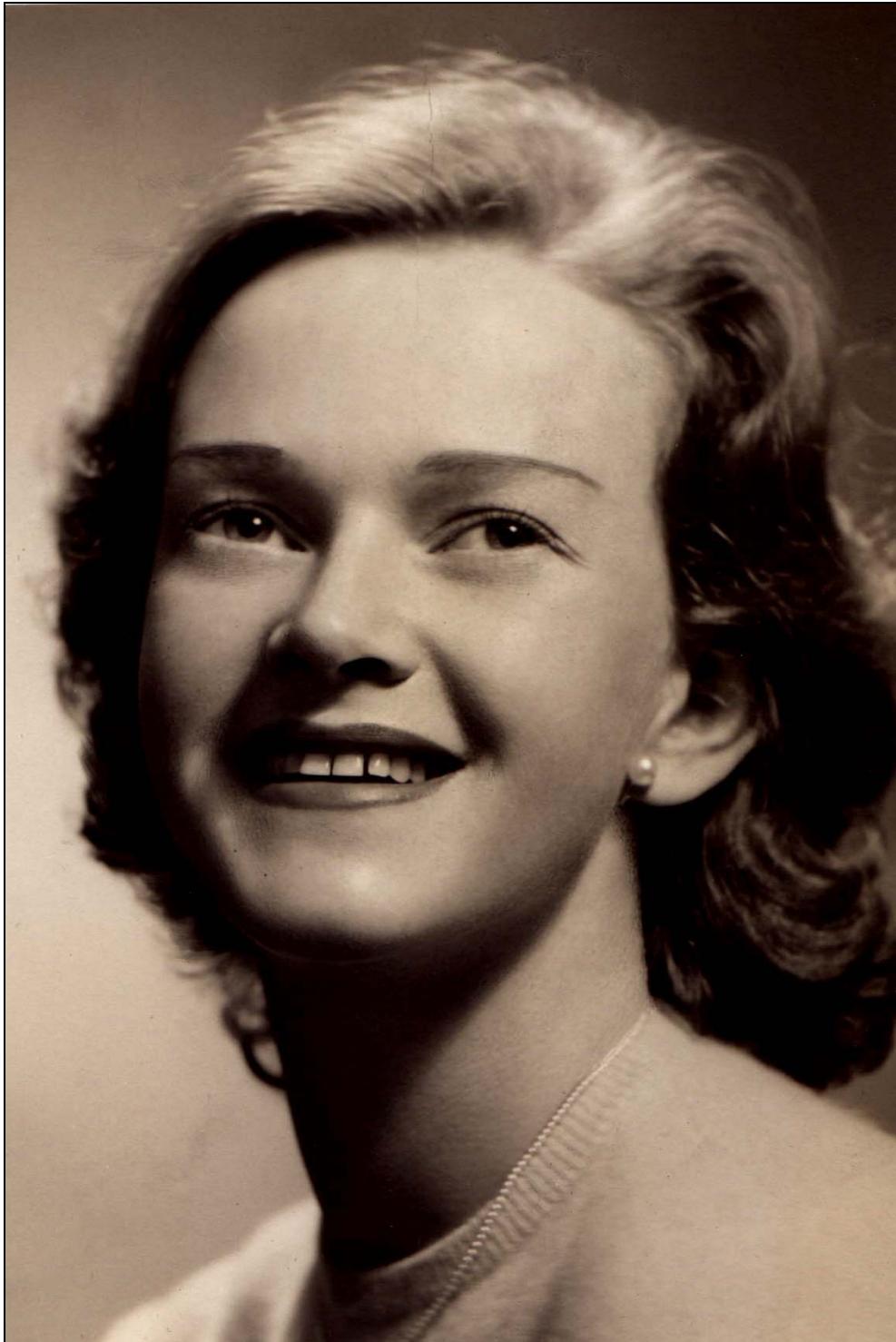
Margie and I were engaged and on our return to Melbourne we bought a ring. The date of the wedding was set for December 1st and she and her mother began the hectic business of organising everything to be ready in six months. 1958 was certainly a year to remember.

One of the things I had to do before our wedding was to show Ken and Helen where their daughter was going to live. A visit was arranged and Margie and her parents drove up to stay with me. I could not have asked for kinder parents-in-law. I grew to love them as my own family and when the time came for me to explain to them several years later that I wanted to become a

sculptor, they showed remarkable understanding and made no objection to my taking their daughter and grandchildren to England for two years. Both Ken and Helen collected paintings, some of which we now have at Agecroft, and they constantly remind us both of two loving people.



'Tramp and Lady' sharing spaghetti



Margie at her Engagement