

LOVE, MARRIAGE, BABIES, THE WHOLE DARN THING, EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

EILEEN'S STORY:

LOVE: Eileen found love. His name was Rupert known as Rube. They met playing tennis. Eileen's family lived on a property producing sheep and wheat, just out from Temora in western NSW. It was just a railway siding really with a school and a post office, and one house had the party line telephone, so there were no secrets! In 1935 the family moved to Wyalong where the children attended the Catholic School run by the Sisters of Mercy.

But Eileen's family had a tennis court and it attracted all the young people from miles around – including Rube. He was a mate of Eileen's brother Pat. In Eileen's family there were 5 boys and 3 girls. Sadly Eileen's father had died when she was only 10 and her mother had eventually remarried, so there was also a stepfather and later, two little step sisters.

Eileen was born in 1923 and says she didn't realise how hard it was for her parents. She showed the two chairs in her room. They had belonged to her parents and had been hand carved and had leather on the seats. Her father had lovingly repaired them and they were very precious as her parents had acquired them when they were first married in 1917.

Eileen remembered her early childhood out in the bush. She remembered going to the little bush school usually in a horse and sulky – one teacher and the whole school consisting of about 15 students of all ages. Life was hard for her family with so many children especially as Australia, and the World, slumped into the Depression of the 1930s. There was no money for anyone. On the way to school Eileen remembered seeing all the sheep skins hanging on the fences. The sheep had been slaughtered, skinned overnight so some of the luckier farmers might sell the skins for a few pence, feed some of the carcass to the dogs, and bury the rest.

Seeing the skins on the way to school was a constant reminder of the difficult life for the families on the land. But on the way to school each day Eileen couldn't wait for Wednesday afternoons. This was the best day of the week because Mrs Winter, the school teacher's wife, came to the little school to teach the girls sewing. Oh, Eileen absolutely loved sewing. Through the Depression enterprising families like Eileen's learnt to recycle any scraps of material, sewing and embroidering them and remaking them into something for someone else. Nothing was wasted. Little did Eileen know how useful this skill would be in future years.

When Eileen was a young woman of sixteen, the Second World War had begun. All the young men from the tennis parties were joining up to go and fight in the war. Eileen's mother had been a widow for six years and life had been very tough bringing up eight children before she remarried. Eileen was engaged to Rube for twelve months before she married him in 1942 in West Wyalong at St Mary's Catholic Church.

MARRIAGE: Oh, what a wedding! Because of rationing and terrible shortages of everything, Eileen's wedding was very much a 'make do' affair. Her mother had arranged everything! Coupons were collected from everyone so the happy couple could have a tiny little wedding cake, sitting on top of a bigger fake one! Eileen had been sewing for years – she just loved sewing so much. She made her own wedding dress – cotton lace with long sleeves. Years later the wedding dress was cut up, then remodelled and dyed a new colour so it could be transformed into a ball gown.

But Rube had enlisted in the Australian Army – he joined the Engineers. Eileen's mother encouraged the young couple to get married before he was sent overseas and she arranged everything. While Eileen and Rube were engaged, Eileen's mother managed to get bits of fabric and the girls, apart from all the farm chores, spent many happy hours embroidering and knitting for themselves, family and friends.

BABIES: Before Rube was sent with the Army to the Islands north of Australia, the first two of their children were born. Eileen fell pregnant with Maria six weeks after the wedding in 1942. Two years and two months after Maria was born, baby John arrived. Then Rube was overseas for four years altogether but he did come home on leave once. When he finally came home three more children were born – the last one Francis, in 1958. However there were also two little girls who each lived for only 25 hours and a little boy who lived for only an hour. There were also several miscarriages as well. Rube was away fighting for Australia against the Japanese for much of the time as all the men had to, leaving Eileen to cope at home, with the babies.

THE WHOLE DARN THING.....: Eileen remembered her husband in the early days as a young boy who was very even-tempered. When he came back from the War he was changed. He seemed very stressed after the war and threw himself into working as a house painter in West Wyalong.

EXPECTATIONS: But what of Eileen's lonely four years while Rube was away? Eileen counts herself lucky to have had the support of family and friends. Her mother-in-law, a really kind and supportive country woman, caught the bus every week, stopping at the store to buy biscuits and cake, for her visit with Eileen and the children. There was also Auntie Doll, an elderly relative of Eileen's who came to stay with the children when Eileen was in hospital. Eileen thought she was wonderful!

As Eileen said, 'you just had to cope – who could you complain to? Life was hard for everyone, but often friends who were in the same boat would club together and put on parties for all the children. Families pooled their resources and helped each other when they could. With rationing after the war it was difficult to get clothing, so everything was handmade, either sewn, knitted or crocheted. Because Eileen was such a good seamstress she could adapt ideas from catalogues and remake them especially once she got a Singer sewing machine. Why, a full 1950's skirt, cut up, could make several dresses for little girls! Eileen thanked Mrs Winter from her old one teacher country school, who had taught her sewing so well, all those years ago.

REALITY: Rural life was not without its hazards. Alone with small children Eileen had to contend with – snakes! With baby Maria in her playpen on the old wooden

veranda, Eileen realised that a snake had slithered onto the veranda as well – and it was a mere four feet away from her precious baby! Carefully she snatched the baby from the playpen, loaded her and some nappies in her pram and rushed half a mile away back home to her mother's house!

Unfortunately there was a full house there, so she had to return to her own house where she discovered that the brown snake had disappeared. She never saw it again but was horrified to realise, that they had been living in close proximity to it for months! Eventually her brother found the snake much later, and killed it.

Eileen should have realised that rushing to her mother's place was not such a good idea. While her mother had always been supportive and keen to arrange everything – she was legally blind, so wouldn't have been much help in getting rid of the snake. It had always been Eileen and her sister Noreen who did all the tedious jobs as her mother could not see to do it.

Her mother had her own share of hardship as well as her disability. Having married again she had two little girls who were roughly the same age as her grandchildren. Eileen remembers particularly, her beautiful little step sister, Jean, aged four, walking a quarter of a mile to bring a bunch of home grown rhubarb, as a gift to Eileen. She was a bouncy happy little girl. Sadly this little girl was buried on her fifth birthday. She had died of measles. Her grief stricken father was badly affected by this tragedy.

In 1963 Eileen's husband Rube left the house to collect some money owed to him. He left happy and smiling, and never came back. He had suffered a massive heart attack. He was 43 years of age. There was not always a lot of work around in West Wyalong for a house painter so he sometimes came to Canberra. He was well known and respected as a hard worker, and as a professional. Sadly he left Eileen a widow with five children – the eldest twenty and the youngest only four years old.

In 1963 Eileen and some of her children moved to the Canberra region – to Queanbeyan then to Kambah. Family and friends, and Legacy rallied to help Eileen and the children. Eileen had never had paid work but she had taught sewing at three different schools, three days a week. Eventually she did get paid and her love of sewing and knitting has kept her going. Her daughters all became excellent sewers and teachers with one daughter, Fran, becoming a Fashion teacher with – an automatic sewing machine!

Years later Eileen went to Technical College to do a sewing course for a couple of years and has never lost her love of craftwork. Sadly her failing health meant she had to move into an assisted aged care facility, but she still remembers all her household items fairly recently being dispersed among her three daughters. Her two sons became carpenters and she remembers how her son John at the age of 20, took over his father's role, helping Eileen run the family, and particularly to look out for Brian, his brother, eight years his junior.

Eileen has photos around her room: of her husband Rube, her beloved sister Noreen, and her beautiful children. Photos of weddings and the latest additions to her family – she is now a great, great grandmother! And there, reminding her of the hard times for

her parents, are the two precious wooden chairs they got in 1917, when they were young and newly married, with such high hopes for the future.