

Eulogy for Auntie Rae; 11th.Oct.2013.

Florence Violet Rae was a fourth child. Her two elder sisters and brother had already done some parent upbringing so the family she joined was well established; if not entirely to her liking. She was born on the twenty-fourth of May, Empire Day, 1922; a Wednesday; six days before her Mother's thirty-first birthday.

The way she spoke of her Mother's telling of events on that, her first day, could be quite strident. It gave the impression that she felt she was unworthy. This was at odds with the confident, dedicated family member I knew; much cherished; especially by Nana and Grand-dad. In preparing this eulogy I thought I had better ignore this disturbing story and avoid any controversy. But then I remembered I'm a Queenslander (born here, in Lake St.), representing another Queenslander, in Queensland.

This isn't the time or place to relate the story. It's in Auntie Rae's book "The History of Our Family", that collects some of the tales that she was told and that she told; along with impressions and opinions as she remembered them. The book was mainly for family and close friends. It's a useful reference for any one trying to recall a memory or indulge in a little nostalgia. In the case of the

story of her birth, I was relieved, to find that my first impressions were not quite right.

Her parents were William Stephen and Margaret Rae Allen; known then as Will and Peggy. You'll read in the history what "possessed them to burden the fragile mite with a host of names" and that "In spite of this imposing array of names, this child was known only as "Baby" till she was over 7".

That "As she grew she was all lanky arms and legs which wound round her at any angle she chose to dictate".

Clearly F V R Allen was not enamored of all her names; or her wandering physique.

I never called her Auntie Vi but her namesake Auntie Vi was spoken of as "little Auntie Vi"; not a name that suited one whose legs wound round and round. Baby became, not big Vi, thankfully, but Violet or just Vi. She tolerated that for a few years but she never saw herself as a violet; certainly not a shrinking one. She announced, defiantly I imagine, when she reached what we'd now call her "early teens", that she wanted to be known as Rae Allen. I was introduced to my "Auntie Rae", as were my four siblings, 16 cousins, their children and theirs and innumerable adopted nieces and nephews.

All this is starting to sound slightly biblical; you know; this one begat that one begat another one and another one. Again from her

account we find “her passion for reading must have been the despair of Peggy’s heart. If there was a scrap of printed matter this fourth born had to cease work to peruse it.” In time Auntie Rae’s main reading began before she started work. It was her practice every morning, to read a passage from the bible. Each day took her consecutively through this revered tome; from the first book of Moses in the old testament to The Revelation of St. John the Devine in the New testament, a year (or two?) later.

I have to admit here that I had to scurry around to check these facts which I found in a small, fragile bible inscribed, “Margaret 6.9.43 with love from Bill & “Squeak” beneath which is “Nellward Allen” in my mother’s hand, probably written in haste, to include with Nell’s belongings as she went off to boarding school.

“Squeak”? Yet another name for this now 21 year old.

Don’t go looking in the Book of Numbers or Matthew 1 for anyone begat called “Squeak” and I ‘m not sure if Auntie Rae owned up to that name in her history book. She did observe though, that her “beautiful red curls fell out after a few weeks and only sparse “rats tails” grew in their place for years. It’s in the book, that story, as she says, “for those who may care to read it”.

Auntie Rae's history was put together between 1992 and 1996. It is an achievement and if you have a copy it's worth keeping. It gathers together facts, figures and stories of the family from Wishaw to Wamasa. Like most histories it is an encouragement to learn more of those who came before. The stories she has collected are mainly of times till the end of the war. And, a lot has happened in the seventeen years since she completed the collection.

Auntie Rae was educated through the correspondence system and courses in secretarial work and bookkeeping. She became expert in the use of a ledger machine, the device of her era that eased the drudgery of double entry accounting. She worked casually in Atherton and was a governess to children on a cattle station.

During the war she enlisted in the Women's Royal Australian Air Force; the WRAFF, which sent her South to places like Wagga Wagga and the shock of real winter. Atherton was Auntie Rae's Antarctica and she didn't warm to Wagga's climate.

My father was an enemy alien and was interned at Tatura in Victoria. Once Auntie Rae was in Melbourne and she took it upon herself to visit her brother in law in the internment camp.

The clearance required by authorities, the journey by train and bus and the conspicuousness of a young woman in service uniform being escorted by a sentry past groups of German and Italian men, was no mean undertaking for a girl from the bush. It left a lasting impression on my father and on the other internees of both nationalities. I think visitors were pretty few. Later, Aunty Rae agreed to be my guardian to avoid my having to appear in a divorce settlement. It meant I was able to complete my primary schooling where I was most at home. It was an emotionally difficult situation for my Mother and Father and it says a lot about the regard each of them had for Auntie Rae; that a settlement intended to make it easier for me was possible. It must have been difficult for Auntie Rae too and I'd like to say now, how grateful I am for the concern she showed and the responsibility she took. It is also very gratifying that Auntie Rae has been a key figure in my own family. Her presence at significant birthdays and weddings, despite the long journeys and cost, was always appreciated and endearing. I know Judy and the girls feel the same; we are delighted Meg and Sophie are here with us today and we know Amy would have liked to come too, had that been at all possible.

Similar remarks could be made by all of my siblings and cousins and their families. She called us her children and accepted and

loved each and every one despite our shortcomings or ingratitude. We will miss our Auntie Rae.

In the few years after the war the Allen family regrouped you might say on the Tablelands and Wamasa became again the place where they lived or gathered. Auntie Rae had certificates and impressive references that enabled her to get a job in the office at AL&S, a well established general retailer with a store in Cairns and others on the tableland. She worked in the Atherton branch under the tutelage of Mr. Armstrong himself; one of the founders of the business. She may even have been allowed to drive his car on occasions, though I'm not sure with him in it. For a short while she lived back at Wamasa with Nana and Granddad, Uncle Bill, Ian and Nellward. I have fond memories of these days. My mother, brother Ralph and I lived in a cottage Granddad had bought from the army and relocated to the farm.

Auntie Rae needed to live in town and when Nell started secretarial work in town as well, Granddad persuaded the sisters to rent a place together. This shared the cost and Granddad had the peace of mind knowing that his youngest daughter had the support of her; 10 ½ year older; sister.

I was to become a member of this household for a couple of years till I went to boarding school. In the last year they rented a quite

swish home while the owners travelled overseas. This trio, the worldly 29 year old, her 18 ½ yr old little sister and their 11yr old nephew was decidedly undemocratic. Nell tells of a day during a power strike when Auntie Rae got home looking pretty weary and wondering about a cup of tea; the classic English antidote for everything.

Nell, with feigned disappointment I suspect, explained plaintively that she couldn't boil the jug because the power was off. Auntie Rae, I imagine exasperated; she did exasperation quite well; suggested that Nell could use a saucepan to boil the water on the stove. "But Rae, it's an electric stove". Was there a hint of triumph in Nell's explanation of the bleeding obvious? I don't think Nell told this story because she thought it uproariously funny but there weren't many occasions when you could feel you had the last word with Aunty Rae.

Nell Larkin is now the last of my Grandparents' children still living. She has been very helpful in clarifying some of the details of Auntie Rae's life on the tableland before she moved to live permanently in Cairns. Nell is conscious of her unique position in the family at this time, and very disappointed that she is so physically fragile that it would be irresponsible for her to come here today. Please accept her apology and remember Aunty Nellward in your prayers today.

The following year I went off to boarding school. The two sisters managed well enough without me; sharing another flat for a while and then buying a house together where they lived till Nell married Barry Larkin. Auntie Rae sold to the newly weds and rented half of Miss Henry's house. This was basic accommodation but with her usual flair she made it an attractive place, to live and to visit. Her affection for my cousins Jill, Billy and Margaret Tyson would have been a big factor in her choosing to live next door to her older sister Sadie's and Uncle Cecil's place.

Auntie Rae moved to Cairns at the request of the AL&S management. She welcomed the opportunity to flee Atherton's antarctic atmosphere to take up a pretty responsible position in the firm's central branch. It was a challenging and rewarding opportunity. She thrived on the increased responsibility and better professional conditions she was able to negotiate.

She leased an upstairs flat on the esplanade overlooking the sea and the mud flats she found so appealing and restful. She approached the Baptist community and made instant friendships.

Norma and Grayson Simpson welcomed her and were delighted when she accepted an invitation to their wedding. Auntie Rae in turn, had been quite moved to have been invited to that special occasion after such a short acquaintance. That was over 53 years ago.

Eventually the idyllic flat on the esplanade was scheduled for redevelopment and Aunty Rae had to move. First to a less inspiring rental home and then to her own house that she had a builder construct in Aeroglen, opposite the aerodrome that gave that district its name.

She was proud of the house. It became a welcoming, resting place for the many of us relatives and friends, and occasionally a temporary home for people needing somewhere to live in Cairns for a while.

In Aeroglen she was in walking distance of Norma and Grayson. She and Norma walked regularly on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons about 3 miles and a furlong (that's 5k for you younger guys).these energetic ladies must have done this for about 15 years.

Another couple, Jim and Ruth Radford also became her friends through the church. Norma and Grayson: Ruth and Jim met

together to celebrate Auntie Rae's 80th birthday and presented her with her first and possibly only walking stick. She was delighted with it and thank goodness, because she could be a little scornful of family advice that questioned her independence.

Aunty Rae served for years as a volunteer at the Cairns Base Hospital and received a commendation for her long service there. Well into her old age, she and Jim used to visit people in aged care homes on a monthly basis. Auntie Rae was good at engaging strangers in conversation, and in comforting those coming to terms with their advancing immobility and forgetfulness. Jim was not just the driver, but a real companion on these excursions. This companionship continued until she died. Jim and my cousin Owen were vested with powers of attorney to manage her affairs. They did this admirably, always making sure her needs were met as well as they could be. I would like all to know that the wider family has much to thank them for. Jim lives closer to the places where Auntie Rae lived and he became her frequent visitor, keeping us informed as to how she was going.

As she aged, Aunty Rae became aware of her failing faculties, both physical and mental. Though it meant so much to her she had sensibly decided to give up her long standing and much enjoyed position as a volunteer at the hospital; never mind the fish dinner that went with it.

Fortunately she recognized while she was yet able to do so that she would have to move from Zebalda, as she'd called her home in Aeroglen Drive. It was distressing to see it sold, but she willingly moved to the Pyramid Residential Care Centre in Gordonvale. She was very happy at Pyramid despite her advancing dementia, but a fall requiring advanced medical care, and in time the need for higher level residential care saw her moved to the Mary Potter home. Aunty Rae found this confusing and frustrating, especially as each day wore on.

We celebrated her 91st birthday there in the garden in May this year, with relatives and friends, and a couple of resident gate-crashers whose presence seemed perfectly natural, and who felt welcome enough to line up for a second serving of cake. It was a pleasure for me to meet my cousin, Jill again on that day. Auntie Rae recognized all her family and friends who came to visit her, even though she would forget they had been, soon after they had gone.

Another fall saw her hospitalized again to repair a broken hip. The surgery was successful and she was well enough to return, in her confusion, to Mary Potter.

On Friday 4th October the staff at Mary Potter called Owen to say she was failing rapidly. Before he had started to drive to Cairns, they rang again to say she had gone.

Those who knew the depth of her Christian faith would agree that this day is not a sad occasion. Auntie Rae had an expression, "may you live long and die quick". It seems callous at first, but when considered, is not. She did live long, and her final breath must have been quick, but she would probably say she didn't die quickly enough, wondering why God had not answered her prayers and called her sooner.

Good-bye Auntie Rae.

Rest now, in peace.

Allen Reese.