

Ah, Sheila

by Terry Wesley-Smith

Ah, Sheila. Where to start? As I look back over my 63 years, it seems that Sheila has always been there. Family photos show the extended Wesley-Smith family enjoying a summer day on a beach somewhere in South Australia. I was a toddler at the time, so I am guessing the photos were taken in or around 1948 or 49. The contrast between our families (Dad was one of Harry's younger brothers) was marked. Harry and Sheila lived in Adelaide, while we lived on a relatively remote farm in the "deep" South East, 20 miles on appalling roads from the nearest town, with no electricity, no telephone, very limited supplies of unpalatable water, and very little social contact with others. To us country folk, Harry and Sheila and the boys seemed to be impossibly sophisticated, and to lead an idyllic life with sport, music and the other arts, and joy of joys, unlimited soft water, much in evidence.

Eventually I left school to work on the farm, but, not particularly unusually for a Wesley-Smith male, had a major falling out with my father, leading to my heading to Adelaide to work while waiting to reach the age where I could apply for flying training with the RAAF. I was so "country" that I cringe when I remember back to that time. I didn't even know how to catch a bus. One day when my motorcycle was off the road, confused by the fact that busses which I thought should stop to pick me up did not do so, I eventually walked from Glenelg to Glen Osmond to work. (South Australians will recognize the enormity of the effect of this lack of knowledge.) It wasn't until I got there that I eventually learned that busses had to be hailed. And I was too embarrassed to admit to my boss why I was several hours late.

Enough about me. I just wanted to paint a picture of an incredibly naïve and socially inept youngster let loose in a big city. The home in which I boarded was sold, and I needed new accommodation, which was hard to find then, especially for a youngster from the country. Sheila came to my rescue and took me in. Taking on an extra resident is a big ask of anyone, and even more so when you already have four children and a husband who worked incredible hours at home after his normal working days at the Adelaide University.

My time with Harry and Sheila was a happy time, despite my frequent gaffes, due to the surplus of love with which that marriage was blessed. I learned much from them both, and will to the end of my days remember the many kindnesses heaped on me by them both. It was while I was with them that I courted my wife of 43 years, Pam, much to the frequent consternation

of Sheila over the hours that I spent in the process. We recently had a laugh together about the time that Harry and Sheila came home earlier than expected and ... Well maybe that is a story for another time.

Sheila, you treated everyone with dignity. Apart from two or three special teachers at school, you and Harry were the first people to take me seriously as a young adult. Harry was the first person ever to take me to a restaurant (at the Swiss Ice in North Adelaide as I recall) – an amazing experience to actually go inside a restaurant! Your home was constantly full of young people who loved visiting "Mrs Wes", which was surely a measure of the way you treated other people. And the relationship you had with our beloved Grandma Wes was something to behold.

You found delight in the simplest of things, and particularly in your garden, in which many of us also found delight. Chips, the "atomic" dog. There was the tennis court, and the casual social get togethers out by the tank stand. Fishing trips to exotic west coast locations. Trips to the apple orchards of Balhanna. Nasturtians running rampant in the garden out the side of the kitchen. It seemed such a happy time, despite the Dickensian conditions you and Mrs Njelke (?) endured on laundry day. Great times long since gone, but the memories remain forever.

Sheila, I owe you, Harry, and your family so much. Whether you realized it or not, you gave me a loving home which gave me the security I desperately needed in that very vulnerable developmental stage, and you taught me so much that has stayed with me all my life. I am only sad about the relative lack of contact after I was called up for national service, and took up the nomadic military life up and down the east coast. Thank you for all that you did for me and for Pam, and for your warmth and support when I needed it most.

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