

SHEILA, MY AUNT

I am Sheila's niece, Anne (Hodge). My father, Keith, is Sheila's brother. I gather these two (now aged 93 and 91) played up considerably in their youth, one of their stories involving speeding in Grandpa's 1923 Cadillac between Victor Harbor and Port Elliot. Sheila was driving, Keith being too young to have a licence, but at his urging (or perhaps not?) Sheila clocked 75 miles per hour! Only three years ago they decided to prove that they were still "rev heads" of a sort by driving all the way from Kangaroo Valley to Sheila's home at Hawthorn, Adelaide, in one day. I asked Keith the highest speed reached on that trip, in his 2002 Ford Fairlane, but he informed me that "that's classified information." I believe they didn't even stop for an evening meal, but had toast and tea at Sheila's before Dad continued on to Victor Harbor by approximately midnight. This provided a talking point for some time, and they loved being admonished by their younger family members!

Dear Sheila - I have always boasted to anyone who would listen about my aunt. I have told her that she continues to be my model. Sheila was a foundation scholar at Presbyterian Girls' College, riding her pony from Belair to Glen Osmond daily, and when I arrived at the same school years later to find a couple of her teachers still there (!) I decided not to enlighten them in case I proved to be an embarrassment for the family!

My fond memories include many tennis days, both at Hawthorn and at Oakbank, which was my family home. I can vaguely remember all the talk when the "Wesleys" bought their beautiful home and we children loved it, especially the underground cellar. Music was always a large and important part of any family gathering and Sheila was the wonderful accompanist on all occasions for the many and varied items performed. The highlight was always the singing of Handel's Messiah, and I sang the contralto part with Sheila's mother, our Grandma Martin. I wish we could have taped some of those evenings because, looking back, I think the choral singing was of an excellent standard. I remember asking my mother whether I could learn the violin and she replied that I could if and when I managed to play Handel's Messiah on the piano right through without a mistake. I used to listen to Sheila's skilful performances - she could sing, too, while playing - and knew then that I wouldn't be taking up the violin!

I am sorry that once I married at the tender age of 20 years and quickly started a family, followed by work commitments, I lost contact for a time with our extended family. I remember feeling frustrated trying to explain to my tiny daughter that it was MY AUNTY on the radio telling us to skip and hop around the tiny lounge room, but she was too young to share the pride with me!

Then, in recent years, we were lucky enough to be invited by Sheila to lunches at Hawthorn, which were so enjoyable, and I found it amazing that she was still entertaining beautifully when well into her "80's." From time to time she would negotiate the freeway and potter up to have lunch with us at Aldgate and she would always wander around the garden and give me "warm fuzzies" and convince me that I had achieved something. Gardeners are kindred souls who appreciate that gardens don't just happen? I just wish I had made those visits happen more often.

One of my favourite Sheila quotes was "Do you know that on the Martin side of the family there are eleven boys and only one girl?" Alas, that was true, but some of the family members heard her say this so often at one luncheon occasion that Sheila would only get as far as "Do you know ...?" and the assembled diners would finish the sentence for her. A really endearing quality Sheila displayed then, and always has, was the ability to laugh at herself. I often think that sense of humour helped her make it through so many years of living in a household full of males, and it's been a wonderful thing that she eventually had granddaughters to enjoy (no offence guys)?

Another favourite thing has been the arrival, often, in the post, of Sheila's beautifully hand written cards and notes, even since the move to Kangaroo Valley. Now, thanks to technology, we have all been able to hear from Sheila herself via the blog and feel reassured that she is happy and being so well cared for by her "boys" and others.

I think of Sheila every day when watering the garden. I have several of her old terra cotta pots, some with the dried ivy stems still trailing around them, and the lemon pelargonium that used to stand either side of the back doors at Hawthorn. I treasure them, together with the old kitchen scales and green kettle – constant reminders of happy times.

My aunt, Sheila, is so dearly loved.