

The Village of Westlake

by Harold Thomas (Sykes) Gane

I was born on 11 December, 1938 at the Canberra Hospital at Acton and which is now part of the Australian National University. I believe that the building in which I was born was later used as the Canberra Film Theatre. The attending doctors at my birth were Nott and Holt. I was over eleven pounds at birth and Mum told me that I was about twice the size of Chiree Hingee who was born a week or two earlier than me.

Mum was known as Alma Elizabeth Gane, nee Reedy and she was born in Bombala - one of seven children. Her parents were Thomas and Mary Reedy who had come out from Ireland some years before. Mum married Stan Gane, a New Zealander and bricklayer/builder. The marriage broke down and she left her husband and took with her my brother, Alan, who was thirteen years older than me. My father was George Sykes who had a son, Kevin by his first wife, June. Kevin is eight years older than me. At the time of my birth my mother lived with George Sykes as his common law wife and was known as Mrs Sykes.

My grandparents, Thomas and Mary Reedy had a farming property near Bombala - probably a dairy. They must have had a hard time in the twenties because the idea of coming to Canberra to work as a labourer was more attractive than staying on the farm. Their first home in Canberra was at Molonglo Settlement which had been used in 1918 to house non-naturalised enemy aliens. Later they moved to 21 Causeway and Granddad died about 1945. Grandma later won about five thousand pounds in a lottery - a huge sum at that time - roughly equivalent to 1000 weeks pay for a working man. Bread at the time was threepence (three cents) a loaf - so she won enough to buy 400,000 loaves. In today's equivalent working on \$2 for a loaf of bread the cash would have the same purchasing power at \$800,000. Grandma was apparently very generous to outsiders from the family and to the Church as there was little to pass on to relations such as Mum. Grandma provided money to buy building materials for the Catholic Church at the Causeway. The people involved built it on railway land that was later resumed and the church disappeared.

My Father was George Stephen Sykes, born in Goulburn, grew up in Nimmitabel and arrived in Canberra in the early twenties with two Studebaker cars which with the help of his brother Gabriel he ran as taxis. I believe he had the first taxis in Canberra, but when official plates were made available three others were issued before him and he got Numbers 4 and 5. On the front of the taxi he drove he had a bell on the radiator cap with the word *Nimmity* above it and this became his nick-name. Kevin is also known as *Nimmity* and on the strength of this I backed a horse called *Son of Nimmity* and won some dollars.

Canberra between 1913 and the end of 1928 was dry territory. Alcohol was not allowed to be sold and during the time when Dad ran his taxis in the twenties a large part of his fares were paid by thirsty workers going into Queanbeyan or by drinkers paying for grog to be bought into the many camps.

In 1929 the Great Depression officially began and times must have been pretty tough because Dad disposed of his cars and had to go on the *Suss* - Sustenance Payments - which was like working for the dole. One of the jobs he did was with a gang building kerbing and guttering in

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Queanbeyan. When Dad had prepared a section ready for concrete the ganger asked him if it was ready. Dad replied, *It's near enough*. The ganger said, *Near enough is not good enough, it has to be exact*. Dad told him, *Well, it is exact*. The ganger then came back with *Well that's near enough*.

Another job he did for the Suss was planting pine trees. He told me that he planted a lot on the slopes of Mount Stromlo adjacent to the suburb of Holder. He then got a job at the Transport Department driving Thorneycroft trucks. Later he was made a ministerial driver and was allocated to the Prime Minister, Mr Scullin.

Mum and Dad met I believe at a Causeway dance which was a very popular event of the time. Mum liked to dance and by all accounts Dad was a fair exponent of the waltz. They struck up a friendship. They each had a young boy to look after and it seemed a good idea at the time for them to join forces and Mum moved into 29 Westlake.¹ Kevin's mother, June (nee Braithwaite) by this time had remarried to Jimmy McKissock and lived at 5 Westlake.

The ideal solution for all concerned proved to be unattainable and the clash of all the personalities and the ill will caused by a lack of understanding all round proved to be too much with the result that both my brothers spent years living with grandparents. Life must have been very tough for them. Each became self reliant and both passed on some of the acquired wisdom to me and I value the help and friendship that I have had from them.

Following my birth my mother brought me home to 29 Westlake - a house built of timber on concrete piers and clad with weatherboard. There were two chimneys - one for the open fireplace in the front room and one for the wood fired stove in the kitchen. There were also two other chimneys of metal - for the copper clothes boiler and the chip heater for the bath. It had two bedrooms, a lounge room, a separate dining room and a good sized kitchen which was down a few steps from the dining room. As far as I know this separate kitchen made the house unique in the village - the others had the kitchen taking up part of the dining room. The combined laundry-bathroom was out the back down a few steps and the toilet, even though part of the main building was only accessible by walking around the back of the house.

At the rear of the house was a trellis or pergola with a grape vine that produced an abundance of delicious grapes each year. The pergola joined onto a summer room which was roofed over but quite open to the breezes and it was a very cool place to sit on a hot day. Behind the summer house Dad had his workshop and he was fairly capable with his hands and produced some quite useful things such as a long handled open-fire toasting forks and a billy cart complete with steering wheel. Alan told me that he used to push me around in the billy cart for hours and he had to keep telling me *Steer it! Steer it!* I would turn around to look at him and this would cause the steering wheel to turn and he'd have to quickly stop the cart to stop me crashing. One day he decided that I was ready for a speed run and we took the billy cart up onto the huge mound of earth near the sewer vent between Menzies House and Carns. This

¹ Kevin Sykes is the first son of George Sykes and June.

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mound was known as *the dump*. Halfway down and the cart was really hooting but I lost control and the cart turned 90 degrees and the rest of the journey down the steep slope was completed by tumbling sideways. I had no recall of this - Alan told me about it as I was putting this story down so I must have had a pretty good bump on the head.

The whole yard of 29 was well fenced with a high fence at the side and back and a high well-trimmed pine hedge at the front. The hedge was a great place to hide. I could push my way into it and climb up on to a branch and sit there and no one would know I was there. People would stop outside the hedge and I am sure that if I could remember the gossip I heard this yarn would be quite interesting to a lot of people.

Mum and Dad had a prolific vegetable garden and there were many fruit trees including a fig and gooseberry bush. We also had a chook yard so we had plenty of fresh eggs and occasionally Dad would kill a chicken to eat. An early recollection of mine is of Dad cutting the head off a chook and it got away from him and ran around the yard headless and I can remember being incredulous that it ran round and round in circles and didn't run into anything. Then when he finally got hold of it he tied it upside down to the fence and it flapped its wings for what seemed like a long time. After they had hung it for a while he would have boiling water in the copper and he would dunk the chickens in it to make them easier to pull the feathers out.

We also had a milking cow and it was kept in the communal paddock which was up over the hill towards Westridge (part of present Yarraluma that surrounds the shops). Dad went up each day and milked the cow and there was plenty of fresh milk. At one time a calf arrived and I was so excited because Dad told me the calf was for me. When it grew up a bit he sold it and I was very upset.

We had three pets. A cat called Bing - named after Bing Crosby Mum's favourite singer at that time, a cockatoo called Cocky and Prince, a border collie - one of the best dogs that I have ever had anything to do with. Although Prince was Alan's dog he was devoted to me and went with me all the time. He was walking beside me when Mum and I were crossing the road to catch the bus to Manuka and the bus driver didn't drive to the stop with enough care and narrowly missed running me over. Mum, who had me by the hand, saved me by yanking me out of the way. Prince wasn't so lucky and the front wheel ran over him and I looked into his eyes as he died. I cried all the way to Manuka and wanted assurance from Mum that God would take him to heaven. That evening Dad dug a hole near Capital Hill and Prince's remains lay buried under the road works around Parliament House. Before they buried him I made them line the hole with leafy branches and cover him with them (so he could breathe).

Alan's cocky was a remarkable bird. It usually stood on a perch but was very tame and could fly around and come back if it was taken off its chain. It knew when Alan came over the hill on his bike and would fly to meet him. Later on when Alan was away at the war the cocky would start screeching when Mum got off the bus - almost a kilometre away.

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Lynette McKissock (Kevin's sister) and I played together when we were toddlers. She and I were together without anyone to look after us one day at 29 Westlake. I believe we were supposed to be looked after by one of the Hawke or O'Reilly girls. Dad had been painting his house and had his brushes soaking in buckets with turps. Lynette and I decided we would paint each other and by the time the big girls came back to check on us we had painted each other green all over. They tried to wash us but to little avail and we all got into heaps of trouble.

Another time I remember getting into trouble was when I unscrewed a valve from Dad's bike tyre and the air pressure blew the valve away and it couldn't be found. Capital punishment was the order of the day so I got a pretty good lesson in something else not to do!

I remember the time that Kevin came to stay for a while. He made me a toy gun just like the cowboys had - out of bits and pieces he had found in Dad's workshop. I thought it was the best thing ever, but it got stolen.

There was a radio and a record player and I remember hearing *California Here I Come* and *Don't Fence Me In* and *Sleepy Lagoon*.

I remember a trip we made in Dad's car - a 1927 Chevrolet - probably to visit Grandma Sykes at Nimmitabel. I was scared of the turkey gobblers - as I was told the turkeys were called. She got her water from a rainwater tank and I hadn't seen one before. There were a lot of stinging nettles and I had never seen them before, nor have I seen them since. We travelled down to Wolumla near Bega where Mum's sister, Jean, had a pub and we stayed there for a night or two.

Next door at Westlake was No 30. The Wilder family lived there and I remember playing with Ray Wilder. He showed me the entrance to the air raid shelter in their backyard, but we were too scared to go down the steps.

Jack (*Lofty*) Harrington was an SP Bookmaker and I remember Dad sent me across to *Lofty's* to take a betting note.

When I was little Dad taught me to make a pot of tea. He was very specific about heating the pot first, a spoonful for each person and one for the pot, pour boiling water in and put the tea cosy on the pot straight away, heat the cups with boiling water, dry them and then pour the tea with the milk or sugar required. (In much later years when I visited Dad his standards had dropped on this and he'd serve me tea that had been stewing on the stove for ages.) I also remember making tea for Mum and Dad and taking it in to them when they were in bed. I remember feeling very proud when they said I had done very well!

The signs of the impending breakup to my family were starting to show. Mum and Dad were often arguing. Dad had apparently been seeing a lot of the conductress of the 'bus he drove - Aunt Nelly - as I was introduced to her. She lived in a flat at Barton Court and Dad and I visited Aunt Nelly a few times. Sometimes I was left in the car for what I remember as *ages*. A very

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memorable trauma time for me was the time when Mum left Dad and while she found us a place to live she put me in St John's Orphanage, Goulburn. I had a thoroughly miserable time and my memories of that place are mostly of me crying. Mum moved into No 12 Westlake along with Cocky the Cockatoo and Prince the border collie cross. There were no garden or footpaths and the weatherboards had many gaps where I could see out and the wind could whistle through. Caneite lining boards were not fitted until I was a teenager, but Mum paved the area near the back door and made a path around the house with second hand bricks that she got from Dad's place.

I was back and forth to Dad's place in those days and Nelly was there often and may have moved in. Auntie Nelly gave me a beaut teddy bear, made of sheep skin and it had realistic eyes. My daughter Rachael inherited the teddy and recently gave him a decent burial - the sheep skin was very brittle and he was unrepairable. I never got to see Nelly after that time. Her present was treasured for over fifty years.

Mum was quite friendly with June and Jimmy McKissock and used to visit them at No 5. One day there was shouting from the Reynolds next door at No 6. Mrs Reynolds was being electrocuted. She was stuck on the ironing cord. Mum rushed in to help and somehow managed to get her off. I forgot what Mum told me about how she did it. I believe that her sons, Vicky and Harry were there at the time.

My brother, Alan, was away at the war and I remember being very excited that he was coming home on leave. He was bringing his girlfriend, Gwen Jones from Murrundi. After the war they were married and are still happily together today. Another time we were expecting Alan home on leave he went up to Mrs Llewellyn's horse stables at Acton, where he used to help before the war and rode a horse home. *Pal*, as I used to call him, impressed me immensely with this move.

I was six years old when I started school at Telopea Park and I had to catch the 'bus from State Circle with all the other children. Colin Smith and Jimmy Hamilton were about my age and Bob Bellchambers was in third class where he was learning running writing. I was too shy to ask to go to the toilet and I disgraced myself. The teacher arranged for a spare pair of pants and my soiled pair were wrapped up for me to take home. But when the bus came to take us home I had to unwrap them to get my penny out of the pocket for the bus fare. While at Telopea I heard a lot about the way the nuns at the Catholic School used the cane a lot and I was pleased that I didn't go to the convent school - St Christophers. My vocabulary at that time was liberally dosed with the swear words commonly used by other children in Westlake and Mum was concerned about it. Her answer to the problem was to send me to boarding school at St John's Preparatory School for Boys in Campbelltown run by the nuns that I had learnt to dread. Father Haydon helped Mum organise this move. When the time came to go there I was pretty upset. Because of the train time table, Mum had arranged to take me there in the early morning and all of the other seventy nine boys were still in bed and I had to go to bed as well. I must have been a bit slow to get undressed and one of the nuns went to help me get changed. I was so wound up that I shouted out -*Stay away from me, you bloody old black crow!* In the

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next five years my original assessment of her proved to be perfectly correct. The milk of human kindness was something that she didn't have. I came home for all the school holidays and have many memories - good and bad - of those time. There was a bully element in Westlake and because I was not one of them I was considered fair game. I went out of my way to avoid confrontation, but on one occasion when I got off the bus at State Circle and was walking home I was surrounded by a group of these *heroes*. I was shoved from one side of this circle to the other. Insults and verbal abuse were shouted at me from all sides and one of their number was encouraged to step into the ring and give me a belting. The one that they chose was quite a good pug, but he didn't have it all his own way and I gave as good as I got. However I had to go home to Mum covered in cuts and bumps and bruises and my clothes all torn. Not one of this lame brain mob was worth the price that my mother had to pay to repair and replace my damaged clothes. None of the group ever gave me a hard time again or saw fit to mouth me to my face.

Like a lot of other people in Westlake Mum was a battler and I am in awe of the efforts that she put into basic survival. The only form of heating for cooking and the water heating and house warming was by burning wood and it was a constant requirement to get more. We were surrounded by the Australian bush and whenever a branch of a tree broke off and fell down Mum was one of the people who would get to it with the axe, cut it into liftable pieces and carry it home. Mum had a way of standing a log up, hugging it to her hip and use the leverage of her hip to *walk it* - sometimes for a hundred metres or so. She showed me her hip on one occasion and it was bruised quite badly. She would then have to cut it into blocks and to fit whatever fire or stove that she wanted it for. I had an ongoing chore, when I was home, to keep a supply of sticks to light the chip water heater and for kindling and fire starters. One time when I was a teenager Georgie Brown from the American Embassy was helping me collect sticks up the hill where the French Embassy now stands. I was carrying the sticks in a chaff bag and he was walking in front of me. He saw a brown snake on the track ahead and spun on his heels and ran back past me yelling *Snake!* By the time it had registered what he had yelled I looked down at the coiled brown snake and I spun on my heels and took off following George's footsteps. Before George had gone twenty metres I had caught him and passed him - still with the bag of sticks on my shoulder. George saw the funny side and had to stop running because he was laughing so much. A couple of years later George won a hundred yards race at Manuka Oval in 9.6 seconds.

Shanghais, Slingshots and Catapults - most of us kids had them and I was a reasonable shot. We used to play *Cowboys and Indians* taking it in turns to stand behind a tree and the other one would bounce a rock off the side of the tree. Once I was up the hill about fifty metres from the track that led over to the Hotel Canberra and Harry Reynolds (later known as *Harry the Con*) was walking along the track. I hid behind a tree and fired a few stones to land on the track about ten metres ahead of him. He complained to my brother, Alan, that I was firing at him. If I had wanted to I could have hit him nine times out of ten. Alan punished me by postponing the purchase of a Crackerjack air rifle which was to cost twenty five shillings. Alan eventually relented and I had the rifle for quite a few years and it was in perfect condition when I sold it to Waldermere Sheremet who lived in No 15 at the time.

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Rachael. Mum died in her sixty sixth

There are many more memories of Westlake. My friends were Johny Thorpe (father *Sack-Em Thorpe*, Manager of the Hotel Canberra), Brian Bourke of No 1 Westlake and George Brown from the American



Embassy. Westlake was a good place to grow up in. It was central to everything of importance including the golf links where I and other Westlake boys played golf. Over the back fence was the bush to play in and in the village lived the range of life's characters. In 1952 when I was seventeen we moved to Narrabundah. I later married and have one daughter, year.

Aboveleft Harold with the famous billy cart that was the envy of all Westlake children. Right Harold on a more conventional bike.