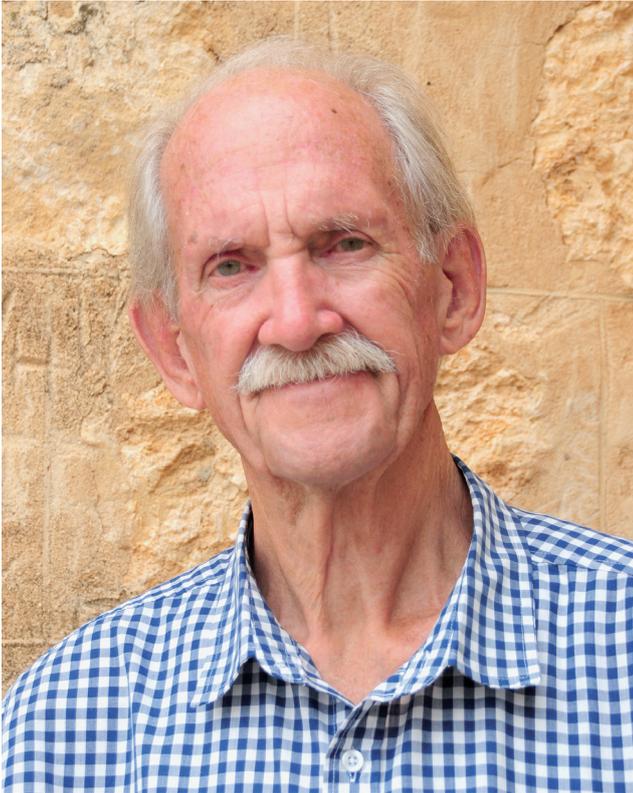


Graham Withers - March 2019



A long-term Romance with Gardens and Cars and an understanding wife

I have encountered many dramatic moments in my life, the first being the day I was born - naturally I was unaware of it, probably howling.

It was the 15th of April 1942, wartime, late in the night, close to midnight when I emerged in a darkened room with curtains drawn at the small St Johns Private Hospital at Medindie. Everything had gone well, my mother Marjorie was ably assisted by a midwife who duly completed the birth documents.

It may sound that being only a few hours old I was so advanced to be aware of proceedings and able to remember every detail. Not so.

Later in life, when I had to produce my birth certificate for a medical, I discovered I was in fact a day younger. What did happen on that night? What was the drama?

I asked my father Howard, better known as Jim for what reasons I do not know, how this came about - he said there was an issue over my date of birth.

The story emerged that the doctor arrived late in the early hours of the morning, well after I was born.

Much to the annoyance of the midwife, he changed the date to the 16th emphasising "it is my baby".

An almighty argument ensued between them both within earshot of my mother. As if she already hadn't endured enough.

"That's what doctors did," my father answered with a shrug. Ever since I have enjoyed celebrating my birthdays over two days... two cakes at a time.

From an early age, probably about four, I remember being fascinated with two important things which were to last all of my life.

Firstly, plants and gardens, influenced by my moth-

er, a country girl and secondly, cars from my father and grandfather, city blokes.

We lived in a rambling old home at Prospect which had a large garden with many favoured shrubs, geraniums, roses, loquat and stone fruits.

Being born in Renmark my mother loved gardening - she tended to everything in our garden often passing on all that she knew about the names and characteristics of plants and the seasons when they flourished.

This love of gardening eventually meant our family made several house moves to reach her ultimate garden 'paradise'.

She longed to live in the hills, often driving down every little lane around Stirling and Mount Lofty admiring the large homes occupied by those elite in their summer residences. "One day we'll move here", she would say.

My father was a builder and had many interesting and exotic cars and motorcycles while my grandfather had a fine family eight-seater buggy with two handsome black horses.

My inherited love of cars caused agony in the family - once, at the age of five I stayed with my uncle and aunt and always admired his huge 1927 Chev tourer.

I decided to be helpful by filling the petrol tank from a water hose at full pressure - my uncle came asking what I was doing. "It's special Melbourne petrol", I told him - it was my last stay-over.

I have owned over 50 cars and trucks either in collections or daily use.

Our first step in the pursuit of 'mother's gardens' was to the hills at Belair in 1950. Set among gums and native shrubs, our house was on a steep street where we had soap boxes or 'bitsers' - with no brakes we raced down roads at breakneck speeds.

I went to Belair Primary School - for a city kid the district meant untold freedom.

Adventures with mates in nearby National Park even swimming naked in the Railway dam at Long Gully, being asked to leave by Railway officials who had taken our clothes was a bit of a shock, but we still did it. Ahh, this life. All Huckleberry Finns.

Then came the ultimate new garden step in 1953, my mother and father surprised us with the news we were moving to our new home at Waverley Ridge, Crafers.

My mother's dream had come true, being seduced by this magnificent old 1860's mansion called Beaconcliff, previously owned by a well-known wealthy family, it was their summer residence, built in stone and rare wide vertical Canadian red cedar weatherboards, with French doors opening on to return verandahs.

Set on five acres of English garden it also had an apple and pear orchard bordered by pine trees, giant red cedars, firs and great oaks - it was a showcase of rare plants, the result of the previous owner having a very good association with the Adelaide Botanic Gardens.

We were captivated by it all - for the first time I noticed the hills had a distinct wonderful smell for every season - the air was different.

Winter was wet and misty, but not a horrible cold - fallen leaves damp and soggy, deep mulch under the trees and shrubs, brilliant soft green moss, bright red polka dot mushrooms and lichen on tree trunks and the aroma of log fires.

Then spring as bulbs emerged and the fragrance of old style heritage shrubs and roses burst in early bloom. And holly trees... red berries in March?

Good gracious. Giant stringy barks, firs, elms and plane trees which looked lifeless suddenly sprouted greenery followed by summer and those soft cool breezes at night.

Autumn was the best - spectacular vivid colours not seen on the plains. Returning these days to the hills, the sights and smells trigger fond family memories.

One memory I have retained about our home - I love gravel, the proper type for driveways and paths in older hills properties - elegant small stones, only white to cream Mount Lofty stone please.

The sound of the crunch of our footsteps and hearing the car driving on our large circular driveway was a delight.

From 11 years old to my adult years I was the best in raking the drive to neat perfection and re-raking to remove wheel marks.

While living at Crafers I completed my Leaving Honours at Unley High School, but in that year our lives came crashing down, my mother died of a brain tumour at the age of 48.

I was keen to study further at University, however, as a teenager, with a somewhat chip on my shoulder with the medical profession after her passing, the thought of being a journalist appealed to me. I could expose all unjust problems.

In 1959 I joined The News in Adelaide as a cadet journalist. I was trained by sceptical yet brilliant old-style journalists. "Don't always believe what you may hear and get to the point" was their motto. It was good advice and remains with me today.

It was the start of my career in the media including Channel 9 and 5DN owned by The News.

I was thrown in at the deep end where you had to swim and think for yourself.

As an aside, I soon learnt politicians talked too much - they haven't changed.

It was time to move. Joining the ABC in Adelaide, in the 60's was a significant step in my life, particularly the big rise in salary.

On my first day I parked in the executive car park in my white FJ Holden reversing into a fire extinguisher spraying everything - I quietly walked to my new office not saying a word.

It was entirely different from newspapers, working on publicity photo shoots, documentaries and TV dramas and travelling with symphony orchestras both local and overseas.

I worked in the 'high-pressure' Sydney Head Office under director Charles Buttrose, father of Ita, then moved up the ladder to Melbourne as Director of pub-

licity TV, radio and concerts - it was a great experience as Melbourne was the hub of new shows and dramas.

I learned to handle prima donna performers, artists and musicians who craved publicity.

European classical musicians had huge egos like rock stars - concert goers adored them and they knew it.

It was a busy and taxing lifestyle. For a change and family reasons, I returned to Adelaide.

I established a corporate public relations company and at the same time formed an associated company with a Sydney partner, bringing performers to Australia including Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, Michael Parkinson, Irish comedian Dave Allen, Peter Ustinov and many others, even the British Jousting Society.

Peter Ustinov would call me by phone from Europe and often try to disguise himself with terrible Aussie strine, "G'day blue, 'ow ya goin'" - I had to go along with it.

Some years later after my first marriage ended in unforeseen circumstances, I met Jan who had also worked at The News - she was secretary to the general manager and Rupert Murdoch.

Through a mutual friend, we met again after 15 years - now married for 42 years we have three children, Greg, Felicity and Christopher and six grandchildren.

We down-sized twice and then decided to build our beach house at Goolwa Beach - our daughter in law Tiffany, a New Yorker, calls it 'shabby sheik' - she loves it, the recycled timber and windows from an old Georgian mansion at North Adelaide remind her of the Hamptons.

We retired to Goolwa in 2006 after commencing the house as owner builders in 2005 - the block is close to the beach and was bare except for a few small wattle and tea trees - there was a lot of limestone, but we were fortunate to have a good layer of top soil.

We established our landscape with plants to suit the coastal conditions and include varieties of lavender, agapanthus and hardy roses which now have matured. We retained some of the wattle and the tea trees have grown over 20 feet and together with a mallee gum and hakia we have shade and privacy.

Jan has maintained a cottage garden packed with all sorts of flowers, shrubs and ground covers and stock from our Garden Club purchases and raffle wins are all doing well and have survived the recent heat.

We still have an interest in classic cars and now have only three Mercedes and an older handy ute for garden material pickups.

We've enjoyed the Garden Club immensely for the past nine years, even being morning tea monitors at one stage and thank our very good friends Julie and Rod Wilson who invited us to join the club and appreciate the great long-standing friendships we have made.

Our interest in cars drew us to the Historic Motor Vehicles Club, Fleurieu of which I am Event Coordinator - we are also members of the Port Elliot and Middleton Probus Club where Jan is Vice-President and produces the club's newsletter. Media again!