



OKINYA

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Gai's childhood memories 1940's to 1956

Gai's memories with snippets from other family members. This is intended as 'childhood memories', rather than an historical document, which hopefully will be written at a later time. My siblings may have differing memories, and had many more years there. I will accept correction or elaboration as I was only 9 when we left Okinya. An apology to Isti - I have had to call her Mim, as that was her name in my childhood.

FAMILY of Jack and Bet WILCOX:

Venie – born 10th March 1934

Sid – born 18th September 1936

Jim – born 25th March 1938

George – born 26th October 1941

Twins: Mymie (Mim, later called Isti)

and Gai – born 24th September 1946

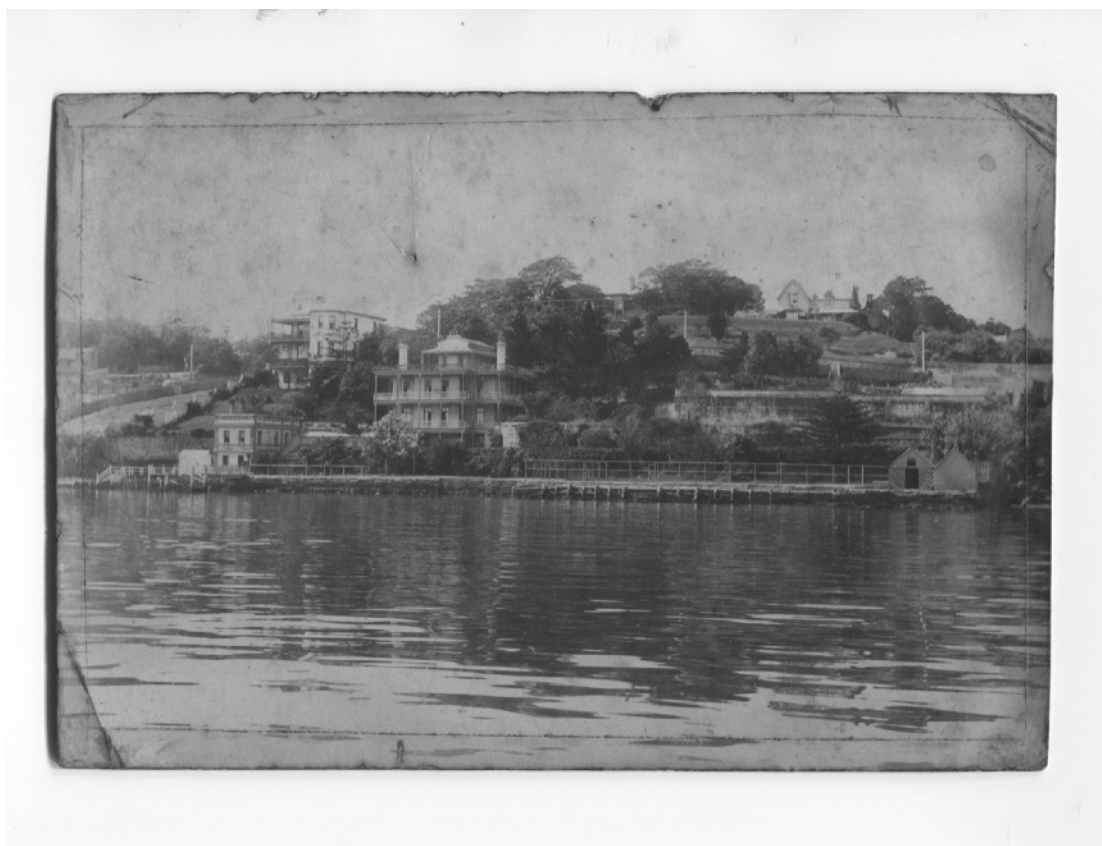
Story by Gai Woolhouse – November 2023

OKINYA - Gai's childhood memories 1940's to 1956

What a privilege to have had some of my early childhood in such a special home – Okinya, the house my grandfather built in 1898, on the land that my great grandfather purchased for him, (as well as the two adjoining blocks for his other two sons).

The address was 85 Yarranabbe Road, Darling Point, Yarranabbe being the local aboriginal tribe.

The name Okinya is aboriginal for 'a place of water' as a natural stream ran under Darling Point. The early settlers built a well there and the early sailing ships would get their water supplies from this well. The photo below shows the wharf on the foreshore of the land which was later owned by the 3 Wilcox brothers.



Our Dad, Jack, was born at Okinya, and was so passionate about his childhood home, he bought his brother and 3 sisters out a few years after their mother died. He moved there from his and our Mum's (Bet / Muffy) home in Gordon around 1938 with little Venie and Sid.

Located on the steep foreshore of Sydney Harbour at Darling Point, this ½ acre property dropped away from Yarranabbe Road to the water's edge. A garage and carport were at road level, with a workshop behind. (Originally stables and hay storage, possibly with accommodation for a groom). A wide pathway curved down to the house, with another workshop, (later nicknamed 'The Dungeon') tucked under the

garage area. This was originally the gardener's store with a section used for storing wood. Dad stored machinery and tools there.

At the east end of the block steep concrete stairs dropped from the road to a path leading to the wide curved stone steps of the verandah and the front door.



The path continued past the house to a gate and more steep concrete steps beside a tall retaining wall covered with Ficus to the next level. This area was nicknamed 'the middle flat' and had fruit trees and a bit of a veggie patch.



Next was a smaller drop down wooden steps and over a swampy area, where shrubs and arum lilies were fed by the natural spring. A narrow lawn stretched across here

and featured a favourite plaything - a Flying Fox built by Dad. It ran the width of the property, from a big oak tree to a palm tree the other side. Jim happened to be in the wrong spot at the wrong time one day as he copped quite a crack on the head as someone whizzed down.

Near the big Oak tree was a charming wooden 2 roomed cubby-house, built by Grandfather George. Tucked back behind this were banana palms. It was fun to play hide and seek here, and to clamber down to the 'lane' and the tiny bit of beach where the tide would swish in and out. This 'lane' was called 'Righton' or 'Wrighton Lane', and was a bit of a no-man's land between the two properties. From street level it was used as a back entrance to the house. Sid remembers watching men with a rowing boat running out a net and pulling it in at the lane beach.



A tennis court then stretched across the block not far from the water's edge. From photos it appears to have originally been a type of clay surface, but in my childhood it was grass. Dad had a ride on mower to keep it trimmed. At the lane end of the tennis court was a small boatshed also built by Dad, which housed the old and leaky VJ yacht and a wooden canoe. Dad also devised a sling at the lane end of the tennis court to hoist the canoe and lower it into the water.

A grand Norfolk Pine stood in the centre of the Okinya block at the edge of the grass tennis court, with a swing. Beyond the court, the swimming pool built of sandstone blocks, protruded into the Harbour. A wire gate allowed the tide to fill the pool. The pool floor was not graduated or sealed, and we would go down the ladder to wallow in the muddy bottom at low tide. There were occasions when Dad and friends would chip oysters off the walls. Sid and Jim would join in on the fun and help. (I guess the harbour was not too polluted then!)

At one time, Dad had to rebuild the swimming pool which was damaged after a storm. Sid and Jim remember this massive project. Apparently Dad erected a 2 way flying fox from street level to a post on the pool. This carried 2 large buckets – one went up

as the other went down carrying metal, sand, cement. He used a hand operated cement mixer. It was the wire from this flying fox which he then used for the one we played on.

On a visit to Darling Point around 2015, I was able to see the new modern tiled swimming pool for the residents of the 'Santina' block of flats still jutting out into the harbour as in the early days.

However, we rarely used our own pool – our neighbour's was far superior. The Spark's owned the two adjoining properties (once owned by our great uncles), both of which had tidal swimming pools. We were allowed to use these whenever we wished. The furthest property had an L-shaped pool, with a diving board, a bridge crossing the centre, and a mini beach. a much bigger pool than ours. Yes, much more fun than ours! To go for a swim meant going to the bottom of our land to the waters edge. A plank stretched across the opening for the tidal gate of the first pool, then a walk along the concrete pool edge to the second bigger pool, and another plank crossing. Both these pools had diving boards which Jack built.

One day, when Mum was taking Mim and me for a swim, I saw our friend Jacquie waving to us from her house. Happily I waved back, but 'splash' in I went. Being only about 4, I could not really swim but at least could 'dog-paddle'. A bellow of shock from Mum brought Jim bounding from somewhere nearby, who plunged in fully clothed plus shoes, to rescue his little sister.

Mim and I would watch Venie and our brothers diving in this pool. They were all very good swimmers, and gave Mim and I lessons. As we grew older and became reasonable swimmers ourselves, we would have heaps of fun mucking around in an old boat in the Spark's pool. The Spark family also had a 'putt-putt' boat. What a treat it was for someone to take us across to Clark Island, or around the point to Double Bay and be treated to a 'Violet Crumble Bar' from the Milk Bar.



At the water's edge beside our tennis court was a stretch of lawn where Dad and my brothers would build a big bonfire each Empire Night. They would set off 'crackers', 'rockets' and 'tom thumbs'. We would be transfixed with the sizzling, crackling and excitement. Mim and I would dance off in the dark across the tennis court with our sparklers. One year the tall wire fences of the tennis court were being replaced and were missing on Empire Night. In the dark someone's sparkler went out but the holder of it kept going with a splash into the dark cold water!

Gai and Mim at end of tennis court beside 'the Lane'. Circa 1954

Our neighbours on each side had daughters only a year or so older than us twins, so we played together quite often. They would sometimes join us in the ‘tree house’ high up in the branches of a big tree. We would have ‘meetings’ and write messages by pressing into leaves. We had heard the story of an old sea captain, ‘Captain Malcolm’, who originally owned the next door property and was a Rum Smuggler! and ... there was a blocked off brick archway at the back of the tennis court! Definitely tempting adventure. George tells of him and twin friends digging away the rubble to discover 3 tunnels - one believed to lead to Double Bay, one to somewhere along Darling Point Road, and another to Rushcutters Bay. They attempted to explore but were spooked before getting too far. By the time Mim and I were old enough to explore with our friends the tunnel entrance was filled in again – but we had also heard there just possibly could be some hidden treasure, so hunt we did. Nothing was found but it was fun looking.

Beside the Spark’s pool was a large wooden boat shed. This was nick-named ‘Malcolm’s Folly’, and we were very sure someone was sleeping there in the loft as there was an old mattress and blankets there! Always on the lookout for ‘the ghost’, but never seen!

The story tells of Captain Malcolm anchoring off Darling Point, with easy access to his property for his smuggling. Apparently he was eventually arrested. Cunningly he told the police he needed papers from his boat so they escorted him to it. He then managed to capture the police, took off with them in his yacht towards the Heads, then dumped them overboard in a ‘long boat’ before sailing away.

At times we would ramble along the foreshore, and occasionally fish – but rarely caught anything. Of course there was an exception when one of us hauled up an octopus which brought squeals as it squirted its ink in defiance. One ramble was quite disturbing when our neighbour Jenny trod so close to an octopus it wrapped its tentacles around her ankle!

George as a five or 6 year old went to Edgecliff Prep School (EPS). He has memories of observing some mischief done by some of the older boys on his way to school. On the hill behind Okinya was a huge building owned by Anthony Horden, who also owned the major Sydney department store of that name. (I think Dad nick-named this the ‘Wedding Cake’). One day a Chinaman delivering vegetables by horse and cart, pulled up outside the building. While the Chinaman was inside, the boys unharnessed the horse and then put it back into the cart backwards! Then of course disappeared very quickly.

The house:

To me the Okinya house was grand and tasteful, and a beautiful design, without being opulent. Sydney sandstone blocks were predominantly used for the walls, with bricks on the window surrounds for architectural effect. Timber shingles gave an added interest around an arched skylight above the front door and the front verandah.

A turret featured at one corner. The roof was slate, and a tiled verandah curved around the harbourside of the house with wrought iron railings.



A wooden slide, a rocker, and a pedal car, amongst other things, gave lots of entertainment on this verandah. 'Mobo' – a sit on horse that moved as you pushed down on the stirrups provided Mim and I with fun.



On entering the front door, the tiled foyer featured two pillars, and beside each sat a Royal Doulton jardinière filled with an indoor plant. (I still have one of these rescued from the fire, but unfortunately it is cracked). The lounge and main bedroom both opened to the verandah, each with an expansive view of the harbour, from the Harbour Bridge to the Heads.



At the outside corner of the lounge an octagonal section jutted out which featured the turret style roof. Dad had a desk there. From outside, this was quite a distinguished feature.

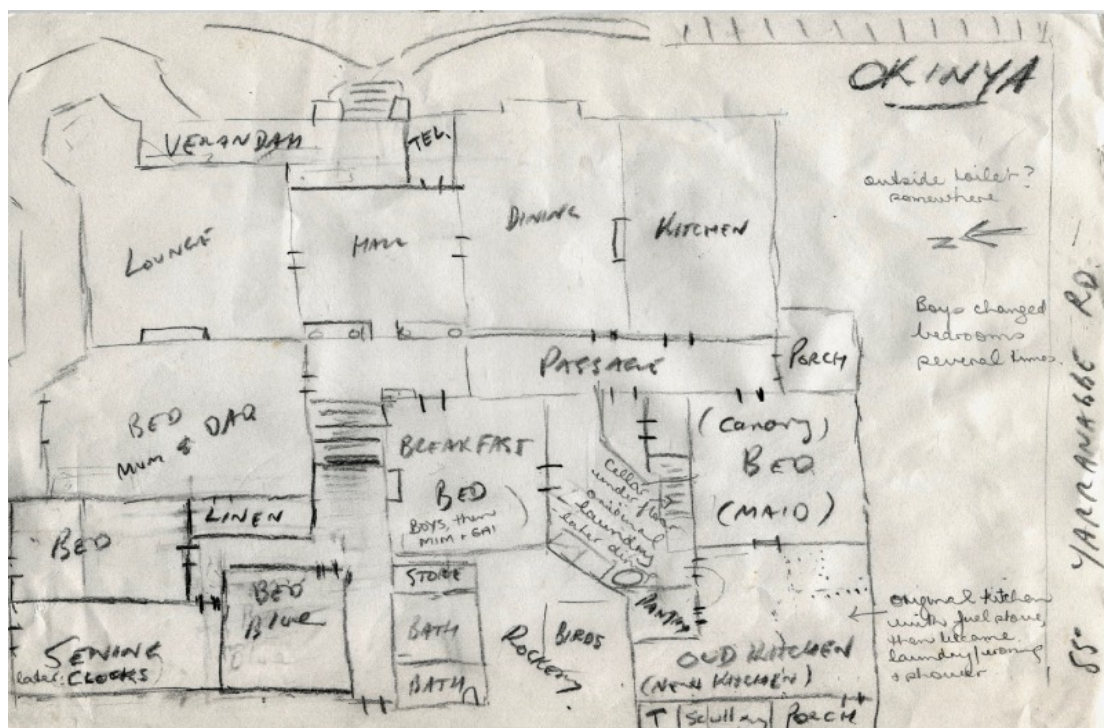
Two other bedrooms were on this level. One bedroom was nicknamed 'Canary cottage' because of the yellow wall paper. This was for a live-in maid or nurse when needed. Sid remembers sisters, Doreen and Evelyn, who helped after the war. Sister Llewellyn was the nurse Mum had to help with the baby twins. Mim and I remember maid 'Maddy' - who we would try to avoid as she always gave 'sloppy' kisses!!!

Canary Cottage was George's room for many years. Sid and Jim had the other bedroom on this level until the twins were born. They then moved to a bedroom down a short flight of stairs to the lower level, near Venie's bedroom.

The toilet and bathroom were in this lower section, plus a large room mainly used for sewing etc. Around 1952 Dad used this room as a workshop for storing and repairing clocks for his business.

Sid made a secret den in a section of the ceiling and Dad helped him set up a radio crystal set. It was pretty exciting for Mim and I to be allowed to climb the ladder and up into this secret spot and listen to the crackly radio waves.

Off the bedroom Mim and I used, was a timber trapdoor within the floorboards. This led down to the cellar where wines were stored. I can only remember being allowed down there once. But there has been a story that our great uncles as boys, snuck down one day, opened the cherry brandy and got quite tiddy.





Gai and Mim



Gai, Bet, Venie, Mim

Dad had built an avery (marked as 'rockery') outside our bedroom, and we always had birds, mainly Quarrions (Cockatiels). Mim pictures him with birds on his head or shoulder. Being a man who enjoyed playing with words we had birds named Jimmy Durante and Ombrearto.

Popocatepetl, Bullamicanka, and Onkaparinga Paradoxis (spelling???) were names our Dad gave to dolls Mim and I had. I wish I could remember others.

A 'pet' tortoise lived with us for a while. I think there was a pond in the avery. It had a hole someone had drilled into its shell. We would be given mince to feed it, but it didn't always get a full feed - Mim would eat some on the way. Mim and I also kept guinea pigs. One morning they were missing - Mim said she dreamed that a 'wiggly wobbly man' stole them!

Occasionally Dad would come inside to tell us he had just seen a pelican fly by. If we went outside quickly we might see it. Well, they were occasionally seen flying over the harbour, but I don't ever remember seeing one at these times, although a 'surprise treat' would be left on the verandah for us. Obviously left by the Pelican!



Mim and I started Kindergarten at Massie House, Vaucluse, the early primary campus for Kambala Girls School, when we were 5. We then went to the main school at Rose Bay for Grades 2 and 3, catching a tram there each day.

Venie went to Ascham for her early primary years, then went as a border to Frensham, Mittagong, NSW. Sid, Jim and George all went to Tudor House as borders from the age of 8!!! Then to The Kings School, Parramatta, again as borders, for their senior years.

The Queen's Coronation in June 1953 was an exciting event for us. Having such a wonderful view of the harbour, Dad and Mum had invited friends over to watch the fireworks and displays from boats on the water. Mim and I were allowed to stay up late for the occasion.

By 1950's the house was needing major refurbishment. Maintenance had been neglected as sending the four older children to boarding school, depleted funds. There was the occasional leak in the roof. We thought it fun to put out buckets to catch the drips. Doors would jam and the windows would creak. Dad, being the mischief he was, would tell us that it was the 'Quinkums'. Whenever something strange or unexplained happened, it was always the 'Quinkums' playing up.

So rather than sell, as apparently Mum suggested, with Dad's love of his childhood home and amateur building skills, he commenced renovations. The kitchen was moved, and rooms changed around. But the changes were never completed.

The Fire:

In September 1953 Mim and I, and our 3 brothers were home at Okinya on school holidays. Venie aged about 19, was away for a trip overseas. She was due to return by ship that month. It was a warm sunny day, so Mum had arranged for us to have morning tea or lunch on the Middle Flat. On Saturday 5th we were with Dad and Mum, or playing in the garden. As Mum packed up the picnic things to carry up the steep stairs, she noticed smoke around an area of shingles above Dad's workshop at the corner of the house, and gave a bellow of horror.

Immediately Dad and the boys raced to the house. Jim said he went up a ladder near the workshop to look into the ceiling. Flames were already raging, so the garden hose was grabbed hoping to quell the flames. Someone rang the fire brigade. Wind caused a bigger flare. Mum, and maybe Dad, raced inside a couple of times quickly grabbing what they could and dumping things on the lawn. But within minutes the slate roof tiles were crashing down like guillotines.

Mim and I were dumbfounded. Mum grabbed us and sent us next door. Mim was hysterical, as was our neighbour Jenny, in terror as the flames blew towards their house.

Six fire engines arrived. Apparently the firemen had difficulty getting the closest hydrant to work, so there was a delay in action as they had to find another. They fought for an hour or so to get the fire under control, but the strong wind created an inferno. A fireball of dust had built up in the ceiling and shot across the roof igniting the back part of the house. The house was destroyed in only about 15 minutes. It was considered that a total loss of a house was unusual. If the fireball had not shot across the ceiling the back part of the house possibly could've been saved.

Neighbours gathered at our garage driveway, staring unbelievably at what they were seeing.

The newspaper reported that the fire was believed to have started from a spark being carried up from where Dad was burning off in the 'Lane' below that side of the house.



The Sydney Mirror newspaper stated damage was estimated to be more than £10,000, but it was probably much more. Sadly, the house was significantly underinsured. Dad was, of course, absolutely devastated. The house and home to his family was 'the pride of his heart'. In addition, £2,000 worth of clocks kept in his workroom was destroyed. And he had to find somewhere for his wife and 6 children to live.

Dad's sister, our Auntie Pop, took Mim and I to stay with her for a few days. I can remember having the horrible smell of smoke and wet burnt things lingering in my mind for a long time afterwards.

George went to stay with Dad's brother, our Uncle Al, until he returned to boarding school. Dad, Sid and Jim found a tent in the garage and camped on the tennis court for several nights probably until we were able to move to a flat down the road. I am not sure where Mum went. Probably to her Mum's (Nan) flat, or to her sister, Auntie Girl.

Although the images of the fire remained vivid, I can't remember being too upset about the things we lost. Maybe that was lessened by the novelty of receiving clothes and toys from neighbours and friends. Although later I recalled missing a beautiful model of the Queen's gold carriage being drawn by the team of white horses, a gift to us at the Queen's coronation. That was special, so sad to lose.

The loss had Dad and Mum struggling financially. Apparently Dad's sister, Jean, assisted with payment of school fees.

After the fire:

Dad really wanted to rebuild what was lost, and did his utmost to do so. First he found a flat for us in Beverley Lane, just off Yarranabbe Road and not far from Okinya. He then set about modifying the garage area at street level. The workshop at the rear was converted to a bedroom for him and Bet, but also with a double bunk for Mim and me. He closed in the carport to become the kitchen. The garage, with its roller door, worked well as a lounge room. A mini bathroom with a toilet and shower fitted neatly at the back of the kitchen.

As far as I understand, Venie was actually returning home on board ship at this time, so would not have even heard about her home being destroyed, and only first seeing the devastation from the ship coming through the Harbour. Ute tells of how Venie would warmly talk of her Okinya childhood, happy years, with a fun loving father. Imagine the puzzled look, and the unbelievable sight. What a shock! She boarded in Darling Point Road for a short time then lived with us in the 'Beverley' flat, before getting a flat with friends at Kings Cross.

I can't remember how long it took Dad to prepare the 'Garage' as a new home for us. Sid had started Uni that year, and helped when he had the time. As a seven year old, I thought we managed very well and were quite comfortable. When our brothers were home they slept in the 'Dungeon', which Dad, with Sid's help, also modified to have bunk beds.

Our Mum was so resilient, coming to terms with the tremendous loss, supporting Dad, adapting to living in a 'Garage', and still caring for her young twins and older children.

I think a big operation took place, but this wonderful husband to our Mum, and fun loving father to his children never came home. He died 9th August, 1956. He was only 45.

Maybe there was a redeeming aspect to the loss of the house. According to Jack's sister, Jean, the huge retaining wall to the lower gardens was in danger of collapsing. Sid and Jim knew Dad was aware of this and had plans in the rebuilding to minimize weight at the harbour side of the house.

Around this time our next door neighbours, the Sparks, were planning on demolishing the buildings on their two blocks and building a multi storey apartment block. To build the high rise as planned they also wanted the Okinya block. As far as I know Mum was approached to sell and initially refused. Mum could not bear the idea of high rise units, but could not continue living at Okinya. Okinya was sold to Anthony Horden, who lived above Yarranabbe Road, and did not want his view built out.

The inevitable happened. These beautiful houses that graced the foreshore of Darling Point were replaced by high rise apartments. The photo below shows 'Santina' in the centre on the Okinya block, and the taller Yarranabbe Gardens on the left. One could wonder what might have been the outcome if Okinya had not been destroyed, and had Dad not died. Could Dad and Mum have felt comfortable with a huge block of flats next door?



So we moved to the house that she and Dad had built when first married, 50 Mackintosh Street, Gordon, on the north shore. It had been rented for many years, and in those days tenants could not be put out against their wishes. Jack's brother, Alan, negotiated a payment to them to vacate. Living there was also hard for Bet as it had so many memories of their early years together, but it was comfortable.



House at Gordon

While living at Gordon, Mum had to endure another devastating event.

Unbelievably only a year after Dad died, in December 1957, bushfires ravaged through the Blue Mountains. The house that Dad had bought in Leura for Mum and his four children to live in during the war, was totally destroyed! Mum still owned this house which had been rented since they moved back to Okinya after the war.

Venie, Mim and I lived with Mum in the house at Gordon for about 2 years. Mim and I changed schools to have Grades 5 and 6 at Roseville Girls College. Sid, Jim and George were all working in the country so staying at times.

Mum then discovered a house for sale at Castlecrag, where Venie and her fiancé, Manfred, had purchased land and planned building a home. This proved an excellent acquisition, located in Sydney's northern suburbs, a large house to accommodate the family, and with a magnificent view of Sailor's Bay from the eastern terrace. It became a happy home for us all. Mum felt so fortunate to again have a home with a water view, large enough for her scattered family to stay when in town, and for many visitors. It was also the venue for both Venie and George's weddings.



view of Sailor's Bay from the Castlecrag home

Her own Mum, our Nan, lived with us there too. Mum enjoyed having company and rented out the downstairs to many friends. Her grandson, Ralph (later known as Rasjid) lived with her for 10 years, and her great-niece, Jenny Cleaver boarded with her for some of her high school years. Bet lived there until she was about 75, before moving to a retirement village in Lindfield.

Despite the sadness of losing Okinya, I treasure the memories of my childhood there.



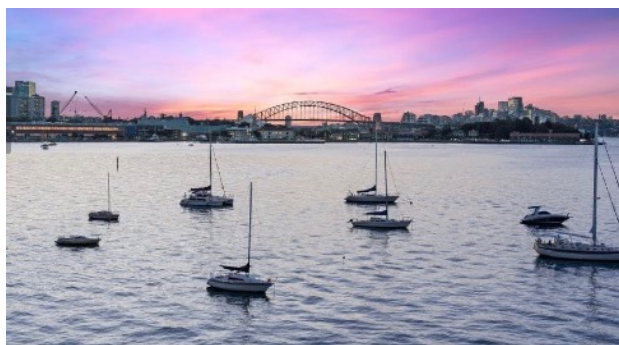
Newspaper article of Blue Mountains bushfire which destroyed many homes in Leura including the house, called Cranagh, that Dad bought for Mum and their 4 children to live in during the War.

NOTES and additional photos:

85 Yarranabbe Road today is named ‘Santina’:

For Sale: September 2020 – a 3 bedroom unit, 4th floor, estimated for sale at \$5.4 million. That for ONE UNIT.

We had this harbour view from the Harbour Bridge to Clark Island and further to the Heads (but without these modern yachts!)





Aerial view Yarranabbe Gardens on the left and Santina on the right.

Below: Santina swimming pool, still jutting into the harbour as was Okinya pool.



HISTORICAL PHOTOS OF OKINYA



Grandfather George, 'Na' (Granny Venie's mother), Dad's older brother, Alan, Granny Venie, Rita and young 'Poppy' c. 1906



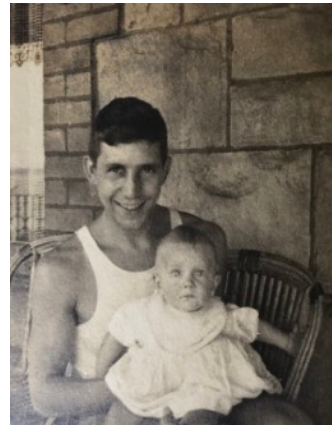
Alan and Rita in Okinya pool c. 1906?



Okinya sandpit with Aunty Jean, (Dad's sister) with her son Julian and Venie. c. 1937



Mum with young Venie and Sid



Dad with Sid



*Dad with Venie in canoe
An older Sid in the canoe*



Okinya foreshore at low tide, probably in 'The Lane' - George, Venie, Jim c. 1944



*An early change room
beside the pool and tennis
court.*

*This no longer existed
during Mim and my
childhood at Okinya*



*Okinya front veranda
with Uncle Al (Dad's brother)
and his son, Kim.*



Venie with George



Venie in Okinya pool, watched by Uncle Ted



