

CHAPTER 1

(1949 – 1960)

Growing Up Wasn't Easy

A thousand people gathered to enjoy pre-dinner drinks at the Queensland Cultural Centre overlooking the Brisbane River to the spectacular city skyline. It was a warm September evening, when a fleet of Rolls Royces appeared in the porte-cochere to ferry us to the Grand Ballroom of the Queensland Exhibition Centre.

My company was a finalist in the Building Construction Division of the 2000 Asia Pacific Awards for Excellence.

When the moment arrived I heard those magical words, “And the winner is Cavalier Software.”

One of my most desired dreams had just been achieved. ‘Not bad for a plumber made good,’ I thought.

I was born in Camden, New South Wales, which in 1949 was a small country town where everyone knew everyone. It was an hour and a half by car south-west of Sydney, although these days, with the giant freeways, it takes half that time. I was the third child of Kenneth and Myra, who gave the world four sons and three daughters. David and Beth headed up the team, with Peter, Mark, Ruth and Bronwyn following me.

Of course, I can't consciously remember anything from the first two or three years of my life. The FX Holden motor car had been released just eight weeks earlier. The Second World War had only finished three and half years earlier and Mr Ben Chifley was the Prime Minister of Australia. Construction was to start later that year on the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric project. It took twenty-five years to complete, with over a hundred thousand men and women involved, two thirds of whom had emigrated from thirty countries with diverse cultures. Nothing like this had ever been attempted in Australia, so it was a big deal. In 1997 the project was recognised as an international historical civil engineering landmark.

On January 20, 1949, at 2.00am, when I was born, I am sure no one knew the world was about to embark on five decades of the greatest new ideas, methods and technology that had ever been seen; technology that would defy the comprehension of all but the most forward thinking scientists and innovators. There was no way I could have known I was to play a part, albeit small. It is difficult to imagine the next generation being confronted with the magnitude of exciting changes my generation has experienced.

It was only after I moved to Queensland in 1971 and returned on my annual pilgrimage to Camden, that I came to

appreciate its beauty. Located at the foothills of Razorback Mountain, with the Nepean River meandering on the eastern boundary and the Hume Highway running through the town centre, Camden was and still is surrounded by many thousands of acres of rich farmland, rolling hills and beautiful views of the Burratorang Valley, which is a thirty minute drive to the west.

I was only eight years old when the Warragamba Dam was being built. It was a huge project west of Sydney. When completed, the Burratorang Valley would be the catchment and storage area for the dam, holding four times the water capacity of Sydney Harbour. I accompanied my parents on a bus trip organised by the local Historical Society. We were amongst the last people to tour Burratorang Valley before it was flooded. In fact, we needed special permission to pass through the large gates that blocked access to the general public. Even at that young age I was captivated by the events that were unfolding. The tour leader, who was the president of the society, explained how the gold mines and the small villages in the valley were about to disappear. He pointed out that where we were standing would soon be hundreds of feet under water.

Above the dam's proposed waterline was a group of coalmines; the Brimstone, Nattai and Oakdale Collieries, which along with the dairy farms in the district, contributed to the affluence of the society in the area. The coalmines were to play a significant role in my early years in a number of ways.

My mother's upbringing was very different to Dad's; she was a well-educated woman from an influential Catholic family, although she was raised in the Church of England faith. In 1921 my great-grandfather, Mr Thomas Donovan, purchased the Badgally Estate, a 1,052-acre property and

mansion overlooking Campbelltown, for £10,000. The property was intended to be a boys' reformatory. However, in 1924 he decided to give it to the Marist Brothers to be used as a Great Public School. In 1926 St. Gregory's College became the first Catholic Agricultural College in Australia.

My father, a cobbler by trade, built a small chicken farm on ten acres of land he purchased on the outskirts of Camden. By day he had a regular job, and was a part-time farmer in the evenings and weekends. Our milk was straight from the cow; pasteurised milk was still in the future. I liked the cow milking sessions best. I would stand watching Dad squeeze the cow's teats, the bucket filling with fresh, warm, creamy milk. At the most unexpected moment he would take pleasure in aiming and squirting it directly at my face, always finding his target. It was fun for a three year old.

Dad made our butter from the cream and killed and prepared the chickens for our meals. There were no frozen chickens in a freezer in those days. He grew up on a farm and never got it out of his blood. When we moved to live in town three years later, he ploughed up half the yard for a vegetable garden. Our neighbour couldn't believe he would destroy the beautiful lawn and asked him if he was mad.

I was no different from other boys; I wanted to be like my dad. At just four and still living on the chicken farm, I decided to surprise Mum by chopping the wood for her slow combustion stove. I took the axe from the shed - this was going to be easy, I had watched Dad do it lots of times - then I struggled to put the log on the block; God knows what I was thinking. I lined up the axe, lifted it above my head, got my balance and down it came. The axe missed the log, missed the block and found my right leg, splitting it a beauty.

Mum went into a frenzy. Living out of town made her feel helpless; she didn't drive a car and with no telephone, she had to run about five minutes up the road to my Aunt Evelyn's house to organise a ride into town to the doctor's. My aunty was preparing the evening meal and was not impressed by the disruption. The doctor stitched me up and I still have the scar to remind me of the incident. For weeks I wondered why I hadn't seen the axe coming down.

I think this accident gave Mum the leverage she needed to convince Dad to buy a house in town. I was six when we moved into our new home. It was a large, white house with a blue roof positioned at the top of a steep hill. The historic St John's Church with its tall steeple towered over us. The church had a big clock which chimed every fifteen minutes for the entire fourteen years I lived there. We were only one block from Camden's main street; ten minutes walk to school in one direction and the hospital a similar distance in the opposite direction.

Living close to all the facilities was great. The Hume Highway was at the bottom of the street, which meant a short walk to see major events such as the 1956 Melbourne Olympics torch relay and the annual Goulburn to Sydney bike road race. The Queen and other VIPs passed through on their way from Sydney to Canberra when visiting Australia. Watching history being made excited me. My mother liked living in town better than on the chicken farm. She was a city girl at heart, having been raised in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs, and farm life was not her style.

By the time we relocated to town in 1955, I was already attending Camden Infants School, which I seem to remember was more about chasing the girls than it was about learning. There were hundreds of kids at school, and I found I was able to compare myself with them. It was, in

fact, the start of my continuing state of bewilderment in trying to understand why things happened to me and not to other kids. Why did I not see things before I bumped into them? Teachers labelled me a bully because they thought I deliberately pushed kids to cause them harm. Even today, fifty years on, I feel the hurt, embarrassment and shame, when I flashback to my first vivid school experience as a six year old.

The incident occurred when I was running in an area I should not have been and I accidentally bumped a girl who was drinking from a water fountain. The force pushed her onto the tap, which cut her lip and could have chipped her teeth. Our teacher, Mrs Anderson, took me to task in front of the entire class, telling me in very descriptive language what a mean boy I was. She screamed, "Your father may think you're a little angel, but I don't!"

This hurt me. I liked the girl. She was nice and I was so sorry for what I had done. I didn't understand why it had happened. Why hadn't I seen her? I also knew Mrs Anderson was wrong about me; I was not an aggressive boy. What could I be doing to make her say these things about me? Word of the accident didn't take long to filter through to the headmistress, Mrs Schroeder. She also gave me a serve and dished out a second dose of punishment.

I was lucky to survive and make it into Primary School, but I did.

My father was a Sunday School teacher. Every Sunday, off we would march, all dressed up in our lovely little outfits so people would say, "Myra, that's a nice outfit little Paul is wearing. Where did you get it?" Of course they couldn't care less. Being polite was all part of the morning's outing. Proudly Mum would tell them about the bargain she had

found. After Sunday School it was off next door to church. I actually enjoyed it; we heard good bible stories and halfway through the service before the adults' sermon, the children were allowed to go outside for games. I made good friendships that still stand today.

Church life gave me a firm grounding in high principles and solid faith: principles which no doubt at times cost me money in business, and a faith that has never failed me. There was one thing I did hate; being asked to read out loud in front of my mates. Dad made me do it all the time, then set about ridiculing me on the way home. He wanted to know why I could not read as well as other boys in his class. How would I know? I just couldn't do it fluently. The same applied with my oral schoolwork. When it was reading time, I would look intently into my book with my head pointed down so the teacher could not make eye contact. I came to realise I couldn't read well because I couldn't see the typed words clearly or keep track of where I was on the page.

My father was good at telling me what to do, but never at showing or helping me learn how to do the task; he always saw that as someone else's responsibility. Many years later a friend of mine asked a well-respected family friend of my parents, why I never spoke about my father. She told my friend that my father wasn't a nice person or a good parent to me. I was speechless when I learnt the content of the conversation. I didn't realise people outside the family knew what went on. I preferred to remember Dad as the only Sunday School teacher who took us on regular outings. Boy, did we get up to mischief!

One day Dad announced to our Sunday School class we were going to the Taronga Park Zoo, which is situated on a prime piece of real estate at Mosman with multi-million

dollar views of the Sydney Harbour. After giving it some thought Dad decided he would enlist the help of Mr Grant, the father of one of the boys. What a joke! He couldn't organise himself, so he had no hope with us, and we were going to pull the wool over his eyes, big time.

My friends John Stuckey and Stephen Robinson started plotting with me. We knew my father would split us up when the two groups were selected and we weren't going to let that happen. No matter what, the three musketeers were sticking together. I was determined to be in the same group as John. While John didn't understand the problem with my eyes any more than I did, he knew there was something different about me and he was always there to help me. He never let my difficulty with vision spoil our fun.

The day arrived and we reached the Zoo without incident. After lengthy negotiations, it became obvious we were to be put in different groups. But we weren't admitting defeat that easily! The three of us took off and left the rest standing, attempting to sort out the mess. I knew I would be in trouble when we arrived home but it didn't seem to matter. Dad was not going to let us spoil his day and gave Mr Grant the job of finding us. Do you think he was going to look for us? Not likely. Mr Grant didn't even want to be there. We kept one jump ahead of him all day, checking in with him at appropriate times to keep him happy. Having a free run of Taronga Park Zoo was as much fun as a kid could have, and we had a ball.

The church became an important part of my life, as it was always associated with good times, forming friendships and was packed with life's lessons. It provided experiences others at school weren't as fortunate to be exposed to.

When I was only eleven, my Dad decided my older

brother, David and I should attend a church camp at Narrabeen, on Sydney's northern beaches. This turned out to be a nightmare experience. David didn't know about my problem and I was confused, still trying to decide if what I was experiencing with my vision was normal and I just had some difficulties in certain situations, or if I was actually different from others due to a real, physical problem with my sight. I didn't want to be a problem to David and spoil his fun. At the camp we were expected to join in night activities, which I found impossible. A simple thing, like walking from the dormitory to the dining hall in the evening, was difficult. To avoid involvement, I decided to pretend to be sick and spin it out for most of the week. I cringe just to think back on the situations I found myself in.

I was learning the meaning of 'faking it', being able to turn it on and off on demand. Over the years this was a strategy I would need to employ frequently, as the magnitude of my problem became more obvious.

At the end of the week it was time for the camp report card. Dad was pleased with David, who scored honours, while I was politely given a fail. The camp leader kindly made excuses for me by telling my father I was too young and I should be given a year or two to mature. He also raised the fact I had been unwell all week, referring to me as a 'poor little boy'. On the way home I started thinking, 'Maybe I can't see too well, but I do know how to control situations.' I wasn't sure what to do with my new-found talent, but I was aware of it.

The important role church life played in my childhood came home to me in 1999, when my good friend Garry Funnell, who also happens to be my cousin, attended a reunion with me. It was the 150th anniversary of Camden Primary

School. At the end of the day Garry asked, “Tell me Paul, what percentage of the people you spoke with were from your school friendships and what percentage were from your church friendships?”

I thought for a moment. “Possibly ten percent school and ninety percent church,” I replied.

The realisation had quite an impact on me.

Dad put his trade of making and repairing shoes behind him to join the long ranks of men chasing the big money working in the coalmines. The take-home pay was eight to nine times that of his old job and the extra money made it possible for my parents to realise their dream of a big family and a beautiful home. I still marvel at what they achieved, considering that in those days the opportunities and modern technology were not as we enjoy today.

Dad travelled to and from work by bus. At the end of each day the bus arrived at the bottom of our street and I would try to be home from school in time to run down the hill to meet him. He must have thought I was like a puppy wagging its tail when his master arrives home.

During my school holidays Dad allowed me to catch the bus out to the coalmine to meet him. It was not just a trip, it was an exciting adventure, as we made our way down a steep winding road, which had difficulty accommodating the bus, let alone the big coal trucks we had to pass. It was considered a dangerous trip down the mountain. One section was referred to as the bluff; a tight left-hander, which, if missed, meant you would reach the bottom much quicker than the driver intended. At times there were reports of trucks going over the bluff and drivers being killed.

It was on these trips I learnt the dangers of coalmining, as I listened intently to what had happened underground that

day. The tunnels were not even big enough for a person to stand up straight. For the miners to be transported the long distances to the coalface, which in some cases was miles into the side of the escarpment, the miners had to lie back in an open carriage, called a dolly car.

As I sat in the bus waiting for the men to arrive from the shower rooms, I would get myself worked up, imagining my father trapped in the mine, while I would be the hero to save him; but I knew I couldn't see in the dark. I would become frustrated at the helpless feeling that came over me. Then a voice behind me would say, "Hello son." It was like the end of a bad dream. With everyone on board the bus, out came the playing cards to pass the time on the journey home. No one was any the wiser of my deep thoughts.

As events were to prove, my premonitions were not without substance, my father was almost killed on two occasions when the mine collapsed, and a number of my school friends lost their lives in the seventies. Their deaths continued to serve as a reminder of the dangers until my father retired in 1980. He was a victim of an horrific mine collapse which saw him only inches from death. Our entire family was happy when he never returned to the mine.

Primary school was uneventful; one big drag and simply a process that had to be endured. The most mundane things fascinated me, like writing the new date each year on my workbook. Dumb? Yes, I suppose it was. Still, I found it fascinating, sitting there writing 1957, 1958, 1959. If all went well, one day I would write 1970, 1980. It was difficult to visualise 1990; that was too far away. These days I think how difficult it must be for my son, Adam and daughter, Rebecca to appreciate what it was like for me to live through the notorious sixties. It must seem like an eternity ago to

them. They probably think of me as an outdated oldie.

I found life in primary school was about jockeying for position in the popularity and achievement stakes. It was about who the fastest runner was, or who could perform more tricks on the trampoline. When my name was missing from the sporting teams there was a sense of failure, I was aware my eyes limited what I could do. The additional time required to focus on what I was looking at gave the impression I was a slow thinker and slow to react to particular situations. Of course, I may have been slow to react, but it was still sending the wrong message; I certainly was not a slow thinker.

For as long as I can remember, my mother instilled in me the idea that I would do something special in life. She would say to me, “When you have a talent you must use it.” She always stopped short of saying what that talent may be.

Mum’s favourite song was ‘Que Sera, Sera, Whatever will be, will be’, sung by Doris Day. I wanted to do something outstanding with my life. I wanted my friends and the teachers to see I was a good boy, and for the troublemaker tag to disappear.

In third grade I began to realise I had a good memory. When I heard something of interest, I had an ability to retain the information. It seemed where my vision let me down, my auditory memory was able to help me overcome the setback. I first noticed this when the class was deciding what our Christmas play should be. The teacher already knew it was going to be Robin Hood, but he wangled it so we’d think it was our idea. To my astonishment a girl was selected to play Robin Hood. “Why would a girl play a boy’s part?” I asked the boy beside me. I wanted to be Robin Hood and I just knew I could do it well.

“No, you are not good enough to play the part,” the teacher said in front of the entire class.

I crawled into my shell at the back of the room.

Over the coming months I sat listening to those in the play practising. I hated not being part of it and I kept thinking, ‘I can do better.’ One night I decided to stand in front of my bedroom mirror playing the part of Robin Hood. Much to my surprise, I went from start to finish without needing to prompt myself; not word perfect, but it was close. I could not believe what I had just done.

I would fantasise about our Robin Hood getting sick and the role being given to me. The problem was, we had an understudy who would take over. This didn’t stop me; I went ahead and learnt the lines. You’re not going to believe it! Two weeks from opening night our Robin Hood announced she wanted out. She later told me in private, she did not want to play a boy’s part. The understudy, also a girl, confessed she had not learnt the lines and did not want to play the part. The teacher was hopping mad.

I sat in the back of the room hoping I would be picked. There was no way the teacher was going to lose face by picking me; it wasn’t going to happen unless I spoke up. Despite the teacher’s efforts to replace the understudy there was no one who wanted the part, except me. It was time for me to work on the teacher, wear him down and get support from my classmates. I knew how to do this; I did it to my mother all the time. I wanted to be Robin Hood and it helped that my classmates saw me in a different light than the teacher. They made it obvious they were happy with me to play the part. Like a smart-arse, the teacher thought he would make a fool of me. “Out the front Funnell,” he called. “Show us what you can do.” As young as we all were, the students told him it wasn’t fair because I hadn’t had time

to learn the lines. I was not about to reveal my secret and made my way to the front. I thought, 'I am not letting you win.' Losing was not an option this time. I knew this was my one chance, and I could feel the class thinking, 'You show him, Paul.'

During the following half hour that is exactly what I did. The teacher was as quiet as a mouse, waiting for me to mess up. I got more than halfway through without prompting. You could see he was impressed, but still he would not give in, his pride wouldn't let him. Can you believe it? He actually put it to a vote, which humiliated the understudy, who never wanted the part. Talk about thick!

The night arrived and there I was in my green Robin Hood outfit, tights and all. The play went well, much to my mother's surprise. No one seemed to notice I couldn't see to move around the stage and I had left out one entire section of the play. It was still great. I thought I might like to do more acting; having people applaud me felt good. It was never to be. Robin Hood was my first and last experience.

That night, I lay in bed reflecting on what I had achieved, I was troubled by the difficulties I had experienced with my vision and my inability to clearly see the other actors and props on the stage. I wondered if others had noticed and were too polite to tell me, or did they perhaps put it down to my young age and inexperience on the stage? It kept bugging me right through the Christmas holidays. It was clear I had been given a talent for retaining information, provided it was presented to me aurally and not visually. I think that is why I liked television when it came to Australia in 1956. I could listen to what was being said and retain the information I wanted.

Dad purchased our first television in 1959: the good old

black and white. The evangelist, Billy Graham, was coming to Sydney and his crusades were to be televised. This was a big event and having a television meant Dad could invite people home after church to impress them. In the days before we had our own television we would congregate with others in the main street outside the electronics stores, which had televisions in their display windows. The speakers were mounted in the awnings above the footpath. There were even times we walked for an hour to my Auntie Deanie's house, just to watch a special program. We couldn't get enough of this recently developed technology.

The Billy Graham Crusades were held at the Sydney Showground. Twenty-three thousand people attended each night and larger attendances were recorded for the Sunday afternoon meetings. This was something I wanted to see. I was only ten, but I knew it would be a great atmosphere. I didn't know what the word evangelist meant; all I knew was, I liked the sound of the word and I considered it cool for an important person to call himself Billy: the fact it was short for his actual name didn't dawn on me.

Billy Graham had a profound impact on my life. I believe he was the greatest public speaker the world has ever known. His powerful sermons influenced my decision to take up public speaking in my late twenties. I wanted to be articulate and persuasive like him. I remember one night he directed a sermon specifically at teenagers; I wasn't a teenager yet, but I would be soon. He used powerful statements like, 'If I had my time over, I would take my worst subject and study it the hardest, until it became my best.' This helped me when I commenced my plumbing trade and professional studies.

Most people regarded Billy Graham primarily as a religious leader and preacher. Although I was interested in the

content of his message, I was more impressed by his role as a powerful speaker with a lot of influence. Over the next ten years there were many Sunday evenings I would lie in bed listening to his sermons on the radio, concentrating on his techniques and imagining myself delivering an important speech. What he had to say and the views he expressed are as relevant today as they were when I heard them forty-five years ago.

Mum was always keen for us to be involved in any activity we could. I was enrolled in the local Cubs with the intention of following my brother, David into Scouts. Beth was a Girl Guide and a good one at that. It was not always easy having a successful older brother and sister, as there were expectations in place for me. I quickly learnt that before you can excel at anything you first have to enjoy what it is you are doing. The problem I had with Cubs concerned the night activities. A lot of the games were played outside the hall in the dark. We had regular chalk trails, which involved one group of trail setters being given twenty minutes start and the second group then following the chalk trail. During such activities my eyes were ineffective; even the moonlight didn't help.

Activities held inside the hall were slightly easier, as the lights were turned on. The game British Bulldog was an exception. One team lined up on one side of the room with the opposing team in the centre of the hall. Chairs were placed randomly about the room as obstacles. The idea was for the first team to cross the room in the dark without being tackled by their opponents. It was a rough and tumble game, just the type boys like. The problem for me occurred when the lights went out. I didn't know if the others could see or how they managed; it was pitch dark and impossible for me.

One of the educational activities in Cubs was spotting stars in the sky, and we often went out onto the street to identify various stars and constellations. The most popular exercise was identifying the Southern Cross, due to our familiarity with this icon depicted on our Australian flag. My experience at 'faking it' was getting another work-out. I never saw one star, let alone being able to spot a constellation. I am told the sky is beautiful on a clear night and there are lots of twinkling stars. I dream of one day seeing such a sight, but realise it will remain just a dream.

My Mum was always saying, "See that falling star? A baby has just been born." I knew she wouldn't lie, so there must have been a star flashing across the sky. I would reply, "Yes, it was a good one, Mum." She was happy. I often wonder, how could my parents not have noticed that there was something wrong with me? Why would they not have questioned me? If I had just understood and had someone help me learn how to compensate, it may have made all the difference.

While it was abundantly clear to me that I had difficulties, I was confused as to what was normal and what was not. Could it be everyone experienced similar difficulties, but they knew how to handle them better? In which case I had to learn how I should handle situations like others. I never went to my parents asking questions, as I didn't know what to ask. I recall telling my mother I couldn't see on the night of the Robin Hood play, but she brushed it off, blaming the bright lights on the stage. My father did the same when a family friend tried to point out I was having difficulties. Dad accused the person of interfering and suggested he mind his own business. Knowing Dad's response would be aggressive, I was very reluctant to ask for help and advice. They always brushed everything off, telling me not to worry about it, and assuring me I would grow out of it.

One Saturday morning we were getting ready to attend a combined Scouts, Girl Guides and Cubs sports day. I was excited, as there would be a real swimming pool at the picnic ground, not just the Nepean River we had to make do with at Camden. I accompanied Mum to pick up some last minute shopping. In the fifties, shopping was very different from how it is today; supermarkets as we now know them didn't arrive till around 1962. It was a matter of walking up to the counter where a man with a big white apron would give his greeting. "Good morning Mrs Funnell, what can I do for you?"

Everything was counted or weighed individually; there were no prepacked items. Mum would often send us to purchase one shilling's worth of mixed vegetables for the nightly stew.

This day at the grocery store she was placing her order while I looked around. Not that there was much to look at; nearly everything was behind the counter. There was a large display of brightly coloured plant seeds and I decided to take a packet out for a closer look. I couldn't believe my bad luck; the entire display collapsed and hundreds of packets of plant seeds went everywhere. I had done it again. The man behind the counter didn't mind. "The stand has had a problem. We'll need to get it fixed," he told Mum. "I have been meaning to sort those seeds." However, Mum would not hear of it and got stuck into me, then insisted that she would put them all back in their right place. I am sure she didn't realise what it would take. As she picked up the small packets she didn't have a clue how to organise them and the shopkeeper tried to tell her to leave them. But no, she insisted, and every five minutes she reminded me of the time: "It's 11.30. We have to be ready by one o'clock," she told me. "We are going to be late and it's your fault. What's wrong with you Paul? Why can't you watch what you're doing?" Yeah! great idea.

Before we left the shop Dad came looking for us. Now it was his turn to let me know what I knew better than he did; I had messed up again. By now I was wishing I could stay home. No outing could be worth this, not even with the prospect of a real swimming pool. In the end, I was pleased I went. That afternoon I had the opportunity to learn the principles of swimming correctly, which I practised at every possible opportunity. Over the years I really enjoyed water sports.

Garry's father had a large dairy farm and I often slept over at his place. We rode horses, rounded up the cows at milking time and we tried to ride the sheep, which wasn't easy, as they were almost impossible to catch. One Easter, when I was about nine years old and staying on the farm, we received our Easter eggs from our grandmother. I was happy to eat mine, but not Garry. He wanted to see if they made good golf balls. I tried to talk him out of it, but he took no notice and showed me how to put a 'golf ball' on a small mound of dirt. The problem was, it was my Easter egg we were using.

"Now stand there," he said. "No, over here a little."

He positioned me.

"Wait on, if you miss you'll hit me!" I told him.

"No, I won't miss," he assured me.

"I don't want to do this!" I unsuccessfully protested. I thought back to the axe episode; it was all happening again.

Between Garry's laughter and my protests, he kept assuring me I would be fine. We finally got to his demonstrating the golf stance. This was one time I was grateful I couldn't see what was happening. "Okay, here goes." Whack! I wore the stick across my head as I was slammed against the brick wall. The rest of the day was taken up with me feeling guilty because I caused him to miss.

Even with Dad earning good money in the coalmines, it must have been tough to provide for a growing family as well as paying for a big house in town. The family had increased to seven with the addition of Peter and Mark. Dad had sold his car to make ends meet and Mum had taken a couple of part-time jobs. One of these was at the Paris Café, which was owned by my Aunty Dorrie. In my last two years of primary school I would go to the café to wait for Mum after school. Of course they didn't miss an opportunity to put me to work cleaning, mopping and washing up plates. My aunty thought I did a good job and paid me five shillings a week to work for two hours every day after school.

I quickly progressed to doing more important jobs like cleaning the mirrors, clearing tables, delivering the take-away orders from the kitchen to the front counter, and running errands. It all gave me an introduction into small business operations. The café had a small kitchen with a high level of activity. People moved around putting things down anywhere they liked, which made it extremely difficult for me to find things. I was starting to notice I had limited side vision, I could not see in poorly lit rooms and often could not see things, even when told they were in front of me.

One particular day, my Aunty Dorrie called me into the backyard of the café, where she was hanging her washing on the line. As she spoke to me, she detected I could not see her and asked, "Why won't you look at me?" Try as I might, I could not see her and had to say so. I endured a humiliating lecture. I knew I should have been able to see her, and couldn't understand, or explain, why I was unable to. I can still remember the way she spoke down to me that day, and how badly it hurt. She told my father about the incident. He just told my aunty to look after the café and he would raise his children.

I was not short of uncles and aunts. Dad came from a family with four boys and six girls, and with their husbands and wives, I had access to a wide range of life experiences. Property and business owners were the main influence. This is possibly why I grew up with a desire to one day own a business.

In our backyard were two large lemon trees and when it came time to play, my favourite game was shops. Selling the lemons and taking the pretend money was fun. I was possibly influenced by the fact that it was an activity not requiring much action, which suited my situation.

In my search for games, which were not hampered by problems with my vision, playing with kites was also a favourite. It involved making the kite as well as trying to fly it. All was fine until one day we decided to fly the kite behind a pushbike with a long string attached. There was a long gentle slope and a bitumen footpath running beside Macarthur Park, not far from St John's Church. Beth, Peter and I reached the launching strip with a nice breeze in our favour. It was decided I would ride the bike, so off I went peddling flat out on a bike two sizes too big for me.

Looking back to watch the kite sail into the air, I was the only one who didn't see the dog run out in front of me. The kite came down as I went up, over the handlebars, and then crashing down. I landed on the bike, cutting my face. My lip started swelling to the size of a golf ball. I was a mess. Beth and Peter took me home, where Mum started the clean-up session.

"What am I going to tell your father?" she asked. "You're going to get it."

"Hey, I'm hurt. I didn't do this on purpose!" I explained.

My problems never seemed to end. A few months later we were visiting family friends on their farm at Narellan. It was

a miserable, wet afternoon and we were confined to playing in the feed shed. With the overcast sky, there was little natural light finding its way through the only two windows the shed had to offer. I spotted three saddles stored on pipe brackets. I decided it would be fun to have a 'ride' in one of the saddles so I climbed over the large feedbags that separated me from the saddles. I grabbed one to pull myself up, but failed to see the end of the pipe bracket, and deeply scratched my face from my forehead to my cheek. That day, I was the luckiest boy alive, as the pipe barely missed my eye. Again I was in the shit with Dad.

The following year, 1961, was going to be important for me; high school meant a new beginning. I had an expectation that all the kids I had become friends with would be in the same class as me. You can imagine my surprise when I learnt that kids from all the surrounding primary schools were joining us. With new teachers and lots of students, this would be my opportunity for a fresh start.

In December 1960, I left my primary school days behind. With an air of excitement and looking forward to the adventure that lay before me, I set off for my Christmas holidays. These were six weeks that weren't going to go quickly enough.

Family Photo Opposite

Back L/R: Paul, David, Peter and Mark

Front L/R: Bronwyn, Beth, Kenneth, Myra and Ruth



St John's Church Camden



