

Fact, Faction or Fiction?

The Ex-Debs of Glengarry

an article by Hazel Edwards (www.hazeledwards.com)

“Which were my relatives in your book?”

My first novel was called “General Store” and I knew that on returning to the Gippsland township where my family had run the general store during my adolescence, I’d have to explain that there’s a difference between fact and fiction. “General Store” was a novel, not an autobiography. I’d drawn on only the setting of the general store and the characters were composites.

I don’t think anyone wanted to believe that. Gossip is the currency of a small township even if writers call it research. So, living in a general store was an excellent apprenticeship for an author, gossip wise.

Four of the ex-Debs from the dozen in the original 1961 photo gathered at a morning tea at Glengarry Primary school. Each was now 61 years old and yet some of the women’s faces matched the earlier girls. Most had lived and worked in the same area and knew each other well. I was the outsider, again, but one made to feel very welcome.

In 1961 I was 16 and forced to be a “deb” because “making your deb” was a ritual in the local rural community, worlds away from the London debutantes’ entry to Society and the marriage market. My parents ran the general store in the three years between my 14th -17th birthdays but you weren’t a *local* unless you married a dairy farmer or had been there for generations, so we were still the newcomers. However, I was in the target age for Debs.

All dances were held in the local Mechanics Hall, even the slightly more up- market “Deb” Ball with white dresses, long white gloves, a corsage (flowers not elastic things to pull in your middle) tiaras and reluctant farm lad partners dragooned into learning the Pride of Erin. They learnt how to waltz and walk with a girl, while wearing unaccustomed dinner suits. We wobbled on high heels, instead of farm boots.

“You have to be a deb. You are sixteen and they need to make up the numbers” My mother insisted. “At least you’ll learn how to dance properly....”

“I haven’t got a partner.”

“We’ll find you one. But you are very tall!”

Tall, unattached males were in short supply in this remote Gippsland township with a general store, pub, bakery and butcher.

The baker’s son was the only one tall enough who hadn’t been booked already. Neither of us wanted to participate, and especially with each other, but a mother determined to see her daughter in a long white dress at least once, could not be stopped. The mothers had a chat, and I gained a deb partner.

As soon as the obligatory presentation dance to the local Councillor's wife was over, he vanished down the back of the hall where the boys had the beer keg. He was relieved and so was I.

In the early 1960s, rural girls were expected to marry early and considered social failures if they didn't. Having a boyfriend was the first step. I had one of those but he lived in another town and was not deb partner material. Teaching, nursing or working in Coles were the only career options and few expected anything else. You were meant to marry the farmer, not become one. Leaving at form 3 or 4 (Year 9 or 10) or earlier was quite acceptable and only those who were brainy or rich would consider doing year 11 or 12 or aspire to university... The name of the 11th year was *Leaving* because most had left by then.

How did I find myself with an old Deb photo and a reunion?

Last year I was invited "Back to Traralgon High" and featured in a national magazine as having been a Gippsland teenager. Childhood family photos were in short supply because we didn't have a camera, and the magazine wanted one of my teenage years. The Deb group photo with the meringue dresses was one of the few photos available.

Some of the ex- Glengarry debs saw the Australian Country Style article in a B& B and an ex-deb's relative who is now the school bursar and local historian contacted me.

Then I got an e-mail from Western Australia. The grand-daughter of a woman whose family grew up in the General Store decades earlier was a keen gardener and claimed her Grandmother planted the flowers I mentioned smelling sweetly around the "outside dunny". Her mother wanted to buy my out-of-print "General Store" book. After checking library catalogues, she found a rare books website so she read the paperback and rang me on the mobile,

"Which ones are your relatives?" I explain about composite characters. She's disappointed.

The night before the ex-deb morning tea, I meet with Leila, who used to work for our family in the store and she manages to identify a few for me.

Although Leila doesn't read much, and her husband doesn't read at all, she's bought my books across the years and they're wrapped and stored in her front room.

I'm very touched.

In the staffroom, three smartly dressed, smiling ladies wait and I don't recognise any of them, but at least we have ID photocopies of the group shot.

At reunions women tend to introduce themselves by the shorthand of their "used to be" name, subsequent husbands, the number of children and their job or their husband's job.

We try to match maiden and married names and faces. It's like a jigsaw puzzle of elusive memories.

With a feeling of relief, I point, "I remember Lorna."

"She's deceased."

I'm shocked. Somehow I had not expected that.

I remember Lorna as a kindly, helpful teenager who lived in my Main Street with her extended family. We caught the school bus together.

"Lorna received an Order of Australia for her community work," explains one of the women. "Did a lot around here."

Two of the twelve are now deceased. But in a small community you are remembered and not just on the 6pm TV news as we will be shown that night as the Ex-Debs of Glengarry.

As I drive home, I think about the woman who had lived most of her life in a small geographic area. She was respected and had a productive life.

Then I remember my ex-deb partner didn't turn up!

And that *General Store* is out-of-print, except in the Finnish edition!

Maybe that's a relief too.

www.hazeledwards.com has notes, links and hi-res downloadable author bios, photos and book covers.

Best known for *There's a Hippopotamus on Our Roof Eating Cake* (Penguin) Hazel's latest of her 177 books is ex-blog "Cycling Solo Ireland to Istanbul" (Brolga) is co-written with her son Trevelyan Quest Edwards who inspired the original hippo stories. *Outback Ferals* (Hachette) is her latest YA novel.

Hazel Edwards was a National Literacy Champion in 2006.