

Our Father Phillip

Dad was the youngest child of the Betley Stevens family. There were older siblings he would not have known well and there were younger siblings he loved. He was close to Uncle Bob, Uncle Lin and Auntie Jessie. Jessie was his heroine. He adored her as did my mother. My sister Elizabeth Ellen, the first child of our family, was named after Dad's mother.

Dad was a hard - working man who loved his children, the land and farming. For several years we owned a dairy farm at Maiden Gully, just north of Bendigo, having only the "best cows" Friesians and Jerseys.

Years later I discovered on a trip to the Stevens family farm in Somerset, England, that the family had been dairy farmers for centuries and specialised in Friesian cattle. Our cows all had names like Ada and Elise and Jessie and Bessie. The bull was always called Ferdinand.

I am the fourth of six children and I always felt loved by my father. I loved helping him on the farm and he used to call me *Bren gun carrier* a WWII gun, which might have had something to do with my name and a little to do with helping him outside.

I loved how he came in from a day's work and put his arm across mum's shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. Mum would be at the stove and I would be at the kitchen table doing homework or helping mum and I adored this tender moment between them. I know dad would have grown up with this affectionate gesture between his parents. Sunday afternoons we all had a rest and mum and dad would go to bed. The room I shared with my sisters was next to theirs and there was a lot of giggling from mum and mumbling from dad, and a few creaking beds springs to be heard, as I tried to read my book.

When I was about eight I visited the farm at Betley. I was so excited to be going on a long trip. My little sister Lynette came too and I remember standing on a gate and watching dad with Uncle Lin in the paddock. I don't remember playing with my cousins though I think, knowing the interests Joyce and I have in common, we probably chatted all day.

Mum didn't come on that trip and there was a sadness to the journey, that dad might have wanted some financial help. Over the years I have thought that mum probably sent dad, we were often short of money, a problem mum contributed to through her love of expensive labour saving gadgets.

Mum's long days tired her and she could lose her temper with us kids and would tell us that "Dad would box our ears when he got home." Or, pointing to his razor-strap which hung on the kitchen door-knob she would tell us to wait till he got home and then we'd be in for it. But dad just said, "leave the kiddies alone Flo, they're alright." Much to our relief she would accept this and cheer up.

Mum and dad loved cards, dancing and going out. Dad loved fishing and one of my last outings with him was to the Loddon River. One of my favourite photos is of that day. All the grandkids and family were there and I sat beside him on the bank while he drew in a fish, took it off the hook and threw it back. Dad was there to daydream, not to fish. I grew up hearing about the Loddon River and I like to think that dad was remembering when he fished along the Loddon with his brothers.

Dad owned a rifle but I never saw him use it. He wouldn't hurt a flea.

I loved how he rode his bike with his brothers to the dances, chasing girls on a Saturday night. (A few years ago Frankie found an old weather board with the words "Phillip just home, 2AM" written on it.) Dad met mum at a dance but she always said that it was she who asked him to dance. I quite believe it. Mum was the outgoing one of the pair - always the first to arrive at a party and the last to leave.

Dad the Verger

Dad belonged to the Bendigo Masonic Lodge and for a time he was a Verger in St Jude's Church, California Gully, which we attended. We were so proud of him as we arrived at the church and he disappeared inside to do whatever the Verger had to do, one duty being to take the plate for the offering. On Sundays dad would be dressed in his suit and tie and a white shirt and I would think that he could be Prime Minister, he looked so smart.

The rest of the time he wore old trousers and a hat with holes in the top. In the winter he wore sleeveless pullovers which mum knitted for him. As he grew older and plumper his jumpers stretched over his stomach making him look like a cuddly Koala. After his death, mum wore his pullovers over her housedress and sometimes under them. She did this until she went into care. She kept him close and she always kept his cup on his bedside table.

Charles has the last item mum knitted for dad. It is in 2 ply wool, pale grey, sleeveless, with buttons down the front. Whenever he wears it the knitting is immensely admired.

In recent years I have returned to the farm several times. There have been many changes over the years but there are still fruit trees and a vegetable garden. Always, when we're leaving Frankie gives me something to take with me, just like the family would have done since they settled there and grew their own tomatoes, potatoes and lettuce.

My father died on November 27, 1977, his sixty-second birthday. I had just turned thirty-one. I will always remember the shock of that day but I had seen him a few days before which was something at least. It is sadness to me that Dad did not live to be a good age for then I would have taken more interest in his life. Over the years we lost some of our closeness but on the last day I saw him I was aware of him studying me, wondering where his little "Bren gun carrier" was. I was living a "fast" life in the city, mixing with the "lowest of the low" on his denominator scale, and I think he was worried about me.

But he had no need to worry. I am a Stevens and I know he would be proud and that I carry, with pride, the Stevens name.

Brenda