

AMAZING LIFE OF AVIS DENHOLM

Avis was born in South Australia, at Loxton on the River Murray to Carl and Doreen Ernst, on 3rd March 1924. Her first five years were spent on their mallee farm at Wunkar prior to the family moving into the town for her education, and that of her younger sister.

It was at the Loxton Primary School Avis spent the years to the Qualifying Certificate, which was achieved at Concordia College, Adelaide. She had won a scholarship for twelve months at a business college, and when this was completed, she decided she was not a city lover, and returned to Loxton.

Her first job was as the cashier in a large department store where six or seven carriers carrying docketts and cash flew up to her elevated desk on overhead wires.

She was 15 when war broke out, and all available men were joining the forces. It was during this period when Avis took charge of the office of the stock and station firm of Bennett and Fisher. It was the age of austerity, gas producers on vehicles, and coupons for many items to keep the forces supplied in defence of Australia.

When peace was at last declared and the boys were returning, they naturally expected to move back into their former occupations and Bennett and Fisher sent her to a position in their Adelaide Head Office. Avis tried this change for a short time, but being a country girl it was not long before she found herself a position on a sheep station in the northwest of South Australia.

She was bound for Mt Eba, the first air stop on the route to Darwin. The many unforeseen incursions on the Australian coastline by Japanese enemy groups had belatedly woken our defence authorities to the possibility of a full-scale invasion and they saw the north of South Australia, empty and seemingly uninhabited, and not serviced by transport tracks or rail, as vulnerable.

Mt Eba offered the Department of Civil Aviation a small parcel of land adjoining the homestead for an aerodrome which was to be the first of the seven connecting Adelaide with Darwin.

The duties for Avis were varied. She had a small boy to teach by correspondence lessons, keep the station's books and store, pull petrol for rare travellers, and take the ten-minute walk to the aerodrome to assist with passengers alighting or boarding. The route was serviced by 21-seater DC 3 planes, and took all day to reach Darwin, so it was up one day and back the next.

Avis was included in the manager's family when they decided to take an overnight visit to friends in Coober Pedy. The 120-mile track north was just that, a rough track, stony, corrugated, three squashed across the seat, kids and a passenger squatting on the floor of the station utility.

A few heaps of mullock indicated we had arrived. There was only one very small, galvanised shed above ground, the few miners lived underground in someone's deserted habitation, black with smoke from the indoor fires.

Avis slept in the wireless dugout and in the morning when asking what the pile of ironing boards stacked in the corner was used for, discovered they were to make coffins for any old miners who might die, and needed to be buried as the 500 miles of bad roads were not worth police travelling that far from Pt Augusta.

Easter weekend races and gymkhanas were eagerly awaited by whites and blacks alike. Best frocks and hats were the order of the day, with long frocks for the ball in the Kingoonya Hall.

Woomera was being built in 1947 and Avis saw Len Beadell and his exploration crew many times on their bush-bashing trips to find a suitable site for the landing site of the Blue Streak missile.

Summer temperatures were high, and any repair work needed on windmills or bores had to be carried out at night. The homestead was within 60 or 70 miles of the Great Desert, so the bore water was only fit for stock; with a 5-inch average rainfall any fresh water was sparingly used.

Avis then accepted the offer of work on neighbouring station Bon Bon, and found this more to her liking, it was a real outback station, she could join in stock work, even at times leading the boss's racehorse being prepared for the Easter races, in a ten-mile walk, while she was mounted on the retired chestnut racehorse "Grampian".

The lack of a paternalist attitude towards the indigenous staff Avis found made for a friendly, happy atmosphere. This of course was prior to them having the right to vote, and Avis expressed the hope that those she knew and respected survived the change.

The next move Avis made was back to the Adelaide hills, where she worked preparing income tax returns for the agent who lodged them. They were nowhere as complicated as today's models, but the information was current throughout Australia.

In 1953 Avis made what she considers was her biggest decision. She married Len Denholm, who had been her boss on Bon Bon.

After managing large properties for other owners most of his life, Len had decided to buy a small property and chose Bellevue at Balmoral, Victoria. It was completely undeveloped, but myxomatosis had cleaned it of rabbits, so hopes were high.

Many soldier settlers surrounded them, Balmoral had been wakened from its torpor, and was simply jumping and Avis found her multi-skilled reputation quite helpful. Over the years she was on the Hall committee, P & A society, Ladies Golf Treasurer, and the Drama Group to name a few.

They both helped with clearing the scrub for a new golf course, and when a bowling green was to be constructed, both Avis and her husband gave tennis away. Avis's name in gold is somewhere on the pairs honour list several times.

When Len died in 1970 of a massive heart attack, Avis found herself with no alternative but to take over running the farm. Her son Neil was still away at school, wool prices had fallen to an extremely low ebb, and everyone in the wool business was merely hanging on.

The husband of one of Avis's friends offered to help her when she needed assistance, and she eventually mastered most tasks, except that of machine shearing – no-one would teach her.

Socially being alone was dull, so Avis joined the Hamilton branch of Parents Without Partners, and in a few months was crowned Mrs PWP of Victoria, then the following year saw her as Mrs PWP Australia. This led to National Public Relations Director for some years.

It was at this time she won a competition run by a Western Agricultural Newspaper, prize a One-tonne Dodge Truck. That was a god-send, as the utility used for feeding out was past its prime.

Neil tried sheep farming but was not keen, wool prices were again low, so Avis was left on her own again and she sold the farm and moved to Horsham. Her first call was the Horsham City Bowling Club, her transfer had been received and Avis has been a staunch member ever since.

Avis was on the Ladies Pennant Selection Committee for some years, but never put up her hand for general committee, but always helped with food and kitchen duties. She preferred to devote her activities to the entertainment area.

The Horsham Arts Council made Avis a Life Member for her input over many years, and she feels rather humble that she has been able to contribute in some degree to the life of the City's residents.