

# #52 Ancestors 2020 Week 34 - Chosen Family

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#52 Ancestors 2020

Week 34 - Chosen Family.

My siblings and I had plenty of aunts and uncles but there were two women who were constant in our lives who were not related to each other or to us.



Mum and Dad's 25th wedding anniversary with children and the "two Margies" either side of my mother.

When my parents were first married, they moved to the small south-western town of Young, in NSW. My father was a teacher on the staff at the Young High School and my mother was busy at home with babies – four of us born between 1945-1952. The teachers at the school were mostly young and living in boarding house accommodation so Mum and Dad's house became a meeting place. Several became lifelong friends of my parents including two of the young women, who were both named Margaret. They became known in the family as “the two Margies”.

For the next 60 years they were present at every significant family event, but they also enriched our lives in other ways. I decided to write about one of them – Margie Beavis – because I realise that as she remained single and had no children, there is nobody to write her story.

I know very little about her early life. She was born in 1923, one of three children. She alluded to a father whose life was forever changed by WWI. I've looked at his war record and found that he enlisted almost as soon as war broke out and was sent to Gallipoli. Here he was rapidly promoted through the ranks and had become a Captain by the end of 1915, when he was sent to France. By 1916, after being involved in the fighting at Pozieres, he was being repeatedly admitted to hospital with “Neurasthenia” and he was invalided home at the end of 1917. “Neurasthenia” was the common term for shell shock - what we now call

PTSD. Although he married in 1919, and returned to his job as a teacher, he never really recovered and there were times when he lived apart from the family.

Margie was a clever girl who attended Sydney Girls' High School at a time when it was "the" school for bright girls in Sydney. She got a good pass in the Leaving Certificate in 1940 with Honours in Mathematics and won a scholarship to the University of Sydney to study science.

Margie would have graduated with her B. Sc Dip Ed at the beginning of 1945. She came to Young either that year or the following one. I don't know how long she stayed but she was back in Sydney by the time I was born (1949) and then she went overseas. In England she taught in a rough school in the East End of London, then hitchhiked around Europe with a friend from Australia.

On her return home, in the mid 50s, she decided that she didn't want to teach any more, and she got a job with the CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) in their National Standards Laboratory at the University of Sydney. She remained there for the rest of her working life.

Margie always had time for us, and she created some great memories. My younger sister and I remember one visit she made to us when we were probably aged about 9 and 7. She spent the morning with us, creating a kite, and then the afternoon tearing up and down the street outside trying to get it to catch the wind. I don't think it worked very well but it was great fun.

When we were older, she made sure that we had some city experiences on our visits from the country. One by one she took each of us to see the Australian Ballet. When Libby started at Sydney University, she bought her a sleeping bag and took her to the snow for her first skiing trip. She loved the bush and was knowledgeable about plants and rocks – she took me one day on a perilous walk around West Head (north of Sydney) which involved getting far too close to the top of a waterfall. She took me to Jenolan Caves, too.

My older sister Jenny was mad about swimming and swimmers and desperately wanted to go to the Australian Swimming Championships at the famous North Sydney Pool. This was about 1962, a golden era of Australian world record holders. I seem to recall that the other Margie came too and they both braved the night sitting in the stands while Jenny and I watched our heroes.

When I announced my engagement to the young man who became my first husband, Margie was a little horrified that I had no engagement ring (it was the '70s and we had no money). She gave me an opal from her collection of precious stones and had it set for me as a gift.

All of us remember Margie's involvement in one of the most notorious murder mysteries in Australian history – the infamous "Bogle-Chandler" case.

Dr Gilbert Bogle and Mrs Margaret Chandler were found dead on New Years morning 1963 beside the Lane Cove River in the Lane Cove National Park. Bogle was a physicist at the CSIRO; Margaret Chandler was the wife of another CSIRO scientist, and they had both been

at a New Year's Eve party the night before. So had Margie. She gave evidence that she had seen Bogle leave the party, and believed him to be alone.\*

The inquest was the biggest story in Australia in 1963. One night my parents opened the door to a distraught Margie, who had driven the 250 miles to our place to escape the press attention. She rested and recovered with us.

When she retired Margie pursued her interest in Aboriginal culture by taking herself off to Central Australia to study the Pitjantjatjara language of the Western Desert people. Most white Australians know nothing about aboriginal languages, so this was a very unusual thing to do. When she returned to Sydney she became involved in the teaching of the language through the WEA (an adult education organisation).

She also travelled in Asia long before it was fashionable and she learned Mandarin. She was an enthusiastic and dedicated bush regenerator, working with the National Trust on various bush regeneration projects around Sydney. She was a passionate supporter of anti-war and anti-nuclear causes – I found her name on a petition published in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1988 urging the Prime Minister not to allow American nuclear armed warships to dock in Sydney.

Like many liberated women of her age, Margie was a smoker, and although she finally gave up – in her 50s, I think- there was enough damage to give her a difficult time as she aged. By her 70s, she had emphysema and she must have had some intimations of mortality because she decided to give away the jewellery she had inherited from her mother and aunts. All of us were given a piece of jewellery. I have always treasured this Victorian piece and worn it often. It had been owned by Margie's aunt, and I think was probably never worn by Margie. It's still in the original box.

Margie died aged 86 in January 2010. My sister Libby spoke at her funeral about her special place in our family. Not an aunt, not a godmother, but a significant and loving influence.

\*. The case became famous because of the circumstances in which the bodies were found and because the cause of death could not be established. In 2006 a filmmaker discovered evidence to suggest the cause of death was hydrogen sulphide gas. In the early hours of 1 January an eruption of gas from the polluted river bed may have occurred, causing the noxious fumes to pool in deadly quantities in the grove.

