


#52 Ancestors # Week 23 - Namesake

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When my parents named their first born in July 1945 she got two names. “Jennifer”— one of the most popular names of the late 40s and early 50s, and “Ruth”, the name of my mother’s recently deceased sister.

My aunt, Ruth Beatrice Whitten, was born on 27 September, 1915, the third child of Frederick and Josephine and sister to Keith and Jackie. As children these three were inseparable – there was a four year gap to next baby, Connie, so one cannot imagine the shock to Keith and Ruth when their brother Jackie died at the age of 6. Keith was 8; Ruth was 5.

Notwithstanding this early tragedy, the Whitten children grew up happy and loved. Ruth was a good average student, she played the piano well and she was pretty and popular.

At 18 she fell in love with Gordon Pickering, a young man 5 years her senior who worked for the Producers Co-operative Distribution Society Ltd, a large country firm with branches all over the State. They were married in 1934, when she was 19, and moved away from Quirindi to Guyra, on the New England Tablelands. Ruth was only 150 miles away from her family but in the 1930s that was an enormous distance, and she missed them terribly. When the company closed the Guyra office they moved even further away, to Alexandria and then to Grafton



Keith, Jackie and Ruth - about 1919

In 1942, their only child, Janette was born.

There are only two surviving letters from Ruth to my mother. The first was written when Mum and Dad became engaged, in 1942. It’s a newsy, chatty letter of congratulations and information about Jan – she has been sick with ear problems and Ruth wasn’t getting any sleep. It’s perhaps interesting that she says (in reference to another friend’s pregnancy), “I’m pleased it’s her and not me, I pity people having babies these days”. It might be an allusion to the war, or it might be a personal comment.

The second letter a short note enclosing a list of things Mum needs for her coming baby, so was probably written early in 1945. In the note she is offering to “run some nighties up for

you” and to “crochet round a bunny rug, like the one Con has for Terry”. She says, “PS I hope it’s a girl”.

On 26 March, Ruth’s body was recovered from the Clarence River at Grafton. She was 29 years old.

The inquest into her death was held on 20 April 1945. Her husband gave evidence that she had been prone to headaches and fits of depression and her Dr declared that she had come to him with anxiety and insomnia. He had suggested that she go away for a holiday with her family. The inquest concluded that she had drowned, her death “wilfully caused by casting herself from the Clarence River bridge into the waters of the Clarence River.”

Suicides always leave a hundred questions. For my mother, hundreds of miles away, pregnant with her first child and unable to travel, the news was devastating. She told me that she never even grieved properly as people kept telling her not to think about it lest she risk the health of her own baby. She was still asking questions right up until her own death 73 years later, and positing different theories. Had Ruth been unhappily married? Did she have post-natal depression? Had she had a miscarriage? Was she unable to conceive a second child? There are no answers.

All she could do was add “Ruth” to her new baby’s name.