


#52 Ancestors Week 34 - Tragedy

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The lives of our forebears were full of sadnesses. Many children did not survive birth or the first few years of life. Many mothers died in childbirth, leaving grieving husbands and children. Many of our ancestors died of diseases for which we now have simple remedies, and the accidents which befell many of our forebears are now considered preventable.

Of all the many sad stories in my family tree, none is more truly tragic than the fate of my uncle Jackie.

Jackie was born on 16 November 1913, 18 months after my grandparents' first child together, Keith. There was also a half sister aged 10, my grandfather's daughter Gladys whose mother had died in childbirth. Keith and Jackie were inseparable mates, and when Ruth arrived in September 1915, she became the third member of a tight knit little trio.

They lived on the family's sheep property about 13 miles from the nearest town and with seven crossings of the Jacob and Joseph Creek between farm and town. The children had happy country childhoods with dogs, cats and horses, a creek to swim in and lots of extended family on neighbouring properties – their grandmother, uncles, aunts and cousins. On Sundays, my grandfather would load them all into the sulky for the ride to church which would be followed by a huge family lunch and games with all the cousins.

On Saturday 12 June, 1920, my grandfather followed his normal routine – he rode to town to make grocery and other purchases for the coming week. He left my grandmother at home with the children, which now included baby Connie, and the girl who was to help her. We know nothing about this girl – not her name or her age or her background. She is forever referred to in the family stories as “the girl”.



Jackie, Ruth and Keith - about 1919

During the day it rained. It rained so hard that the Jacob and Joseph Creek rose and rose and my grandfather was forced to stay in town. Back on the farm, my no doubt frazzled grandmother sent the children off to play in the care of the girl. When they returned late in the afternoon, Jackie seemed to be unwell. He was quiet and listless as they ate their dinner. Did he complain of a headache, I wonder?

As the night wore on, Jackie lapsed into unconsciousness. My frantic grandmother quizzed all the children – what could have happened during the day to make him sick?

Keith told her. The girl had demonstrated to them how to kill a rabbit, by chopping it across the back of its neck with the side of the hand. She had demonstrated on Jackie.

Jackie died in the night.

My grandmother was alone and isolated in the house with the girl and the children. The creek rose higher. There was no telephone and anyway, nobody could cross the creek – not her husband, nor a clergyman, nor the undertaker. She laid Jackie out in the parlour and went about caring for the rest of the children, weeping into her apron. It was to be two days before anyone could broach the creek and get to them.

There is such tragedy in this story. Tragedy for my grandparents who lost a beloved son. They talked about him for the rest of their lives, so that for my mother, born 6 years later, he was always a family presence.

Tragedy for “the girl”. How did she live for the rest of her life with the knowledge that she had killed a child? My grandparents did not bring charges against her or even seek an inquest into Jackie’s death. My mother thought that they would have wanted to spare the girl from the pain and notoriety such charges might have brought into her young life but she had to live with that burden always.

And tragedy for Keith and Ruth, who lost their best playmate. Keith had a sadness in his eyes for the rest of his life. Ruth committed suicide at the age of 28. Nobody really knows why

