

**Eulogy for
Nathalie C.F. Semmler
3rd January 2017 – 13th June 2021**

Several years ago, I took mum to visit a friend in a Narrandera nursing home. In the foyer was a framed poster saying to the effect: *When you visit us, think of us not as old inactive people, but remember that we once laughed, sang and played as children, became useful members of society...., played sport, raised families, worked for our community and lived active and valued lives.* Sometimes we have to read such things to be reminded of these obvious facts, especially for younger people who may have only known the person in their senior years. Nathalie Semmler certainly did all the things listed on that poster.

Our mother was officially named Nathalie Cyrilla Floy Gordon a few days after her birth. There is an explanation as to why she was given these unusual names. Nathalie was born in North Terrace, Adelaide, at a hospital that was owned by the doctor who delivered her. Nathalie's mother, Margaret, was advised to have 6 weeks' rest before returning home to her husband, Athol, and the farm, located in what was then called the Back Blocks of South Australia. Mother Margaret was invited to have her rest at the home of the doctor something that would not be heard of now-a-days. But the good doctor happened to be the father-in-law of Nathalie's aunt, whose name was Nathalie Cyrilla Floy Robertson.... so, in appreciation for the family's generosity, the new baby was named after her aunt.

I digress here for a moment to mention some of the events shaping the world at the time of Nathalie's birth. World War I was still raging. In that year, thousands of Australians were killed in France and Belgium and the now-famous light horse charge on Beersheba took place in Palestine. The Australian government decreed that all towns with German names and street names should be changed. Daylight saving was introduced for the first time. A petition was presented to Prime Minister Billy Hughes to legislate that shouting of drinks in pubs be made illegal. The Holden motor car body building works opened in Adelaide. Movies were silent, and Nathalie's future husband would be a musician who played the banjo at those movies.

Nathalie's family farm was near the present-day village of Wanbi, south of Loxton, and next door to the farm of her Gordon grandparents. Nathalie had a remarkable memory of her years on that farm, even though she was only 5 years old when she left. The farm house was on a sandy rise and a windmill stood nearby. When she was taken back there by her cousin Robert in the late 1980s, she remarked to the farmer that the windmill had been shifted from its original place. He was quite amazed and answered, "Yes, it has been moved about 4 metres."

It was while living on that farm that Margaret Gordon's mother, Margaret Bruce, emigrated from Scotland to live with them. This caused some anxiety for Nathalie as she had to share her bedroom with her grandmother, who had a broad Scot's accent. Poor Nathalie had difficulty understanding her for some time, but took on some of her grandmother's accents and quaint Scottish sayings.

In those times, the area of Wanbi was covered in limestone. Athol tired of battling with this problem so leased the farm and moved to Cannie, near Quambatook in the mallee area of north west Victoria, where he share-farmed. It was there that Nathalie commenced school. Not long after moving to Cannie, Nathalie was presented with a baby brother, Bruce Stirling Gordon.

When Nathalie was 10 years old, Athol decided he would like once again, to own his own farm, so the Wanbi property was sold and the family undertook a property-search tour of New South Wales. They visited Barellan, and not long after, the land agent wrote to Athol to say he had found him a good farm. Athol journeyed by train from Quambatook to Barellan..... something you certainly can't do now..... and bought *Glenora* Moombooldool on the spot.

Nathalie often told us that she did not want to leave her lovely little school and lovely teacher to move to Moombooldool. She sat in the car's back seat, squashed between a mattress and brooms, grumbling all the way and being terrified when they crossed the Mirrool Creek on a rattly old bridge that she was certain would fall down. At this point of the journey, Athol, in great excitement, said "Look, you can see the Barellan silos" but Nathalie was not interested in looking at some silly old silos. Not only did they leave behind a nice house and school, but Nathalie's beloved Granny Bruce had died while they were there.

They arrived in Barellan to buy supplies from the three grocery stores that were on offer. Nathalie often told the story of how they drove around for ages looking for a car park and eventually found one outside one of the hotels, but Margaret was disgusted that they should choose to park in such an unseemly spot. They then arrived at *Glenora* and what they later called the house of horrors. It was greatly inferior to their Cannie house and was very dirty, as swaggies had camped in it. Athol consoled them by promising to build a new house.... a promise that was never fulfilled.

Nathalie attended North Moombooldool School which was a 3 kilometre walk from their house. At various times, the teacher boarded with them, so Nathalie had to give up her bedroom. At the end of her primary schooling, Nathalie was offered a place at Ardlethan School to complete her education but this was not practical. She ended up returning to her primary school as a sewing teacher. She made several life-long friendships at that little school.... namely the McInerney sisters, Gean McVittie later Wisely, and Ita Quade later Foley.

As Nathalie matured, she sometimes visited *Euronga*, the neighbouring farm that was owned by John and Elizabeth Semmler, who had a handsome son called Jack. Nathalie encouraged her father to visit *Euronga* as frequently as possible so she might catch a glimpse of that man. As well as catching a glimpse, she caught him and they married in the Barellan Anglican Church on the 15th of February 1938 on what was an extremely hot, windy and dusty day. It was so hot that the wedding flowers were kept in the fridge at the Barellan Hotel until needed.

For their honeymoon, Nathalie and Jack undertook an extensive tour of the state. Nathalie had a vivid memory of camping at a water tank by the side of the road near Moree, when on

the car wireless they heard the news that Hitler had invaded Poland. Yes, they did have a car wireless, or radio in today's terms, something very rare in 1938. They returned from the honeymoon to live with Jack's mother, Elizabeth. Jack's father had by this time left the farm to live at Fairfield.

When the first baby, John, came along, it was necessary to build a house. They did not actually build it, but bought it in Merriwagga and had it transported to the selected site. Nathalie and Jack were away on the day the house was delivered to its resting place. They recalled turning into the farm driveway and their hearts sinking when they saw a dreadful looking corrugated iron box, sitting on the sand-ridge. They both worked hard at improving their crude house, especially as it had to be enlarged with the birth of more babies, but it was not until 1956 when they had benefited from the 1950s wool boom and several good cropping years, that proper renovations and extensions were undertaken. The electricity was connected in 1958 and everything was roses.... in more ways than one, as by then, Jack had established an extensive rose garden. Of those babies that filled the house, there were five in total; John, Gordon, Allan Neville and Colin. On the 19th of January 1949, a daughter, Valma Jean was born, but died on the same day. Valma is buried in the old Anglican section of Leeton Cemetery.

Nathalie was introduced to community social work at the age of 16 when her mother arrived home from a CWA meeting to announce that her daughter had been elected president of the newly formed Younger Set. Daughter was not amused, but did the job with gusto.... with the help of her friend Ita. After marriage, she continued to support the CWA, dragging her two little boys along to meetings. All this came asunder one day when little boy number two, climbed on top of the piano, much to the disgust of his Grandmother Semmler. As a result, Nathalie stayed away from meetings for several years but always supported their activities. She enjoyed the CWA, especially as cultural officer, and entered the state writing competitions. It was through CWA that she made another long-term friend in Judy Findlay. She encouraged Judy with her writing and often declared she should be the Australian Prime Minister. It was through Judy that Nathalie became an active member of the Barellan Museum, and was thrilled to be honoured with Life Membership of that organisation. In her last few years on the farm, she established a museum of her own in the house, exhibiting the many historical items that were kept by our Grandmother Semmler. This little museum attracted many visitors and was written about in the Wagga and Canberra newspapers.

Nathalie must have learned something from her experience as CWA Younger Set president as she ended up a life member, not only of CWA but also the Barellan Red Cross, with several awards over the years. She was also secretary of the Moombooldool Football Club Ladies Auxiliary, which involved assisting with afternoon tea at half time, under what these days would be termed non-compliant conditions. After many home games, a dinner dance was held in the Moombooldool Hall. Nathalie helped with cooking a seemingly endless supply of mince-meat with peas and carrots for the evening meal.

Nathalie was secretary of the Moombooldool Church Guild for its life time and was missionary secretary, which involved collecting clothes and sending them to Sydney. When

she took on the job in 1951, she probably did not envisage that the church guild would have three generations of Semmlers as members. After the closure of the Moombooldool Church, Nathalie often hosted sharing group for the local ladies. She was also secretary of the school P&C Association for many years. Nathalie always had an interest in local history, so in 1962 when the Moombooldool Hall celebrated its 50th anniversary, she was asked, along with Don Kelly, to write the history of Moombooldool, but whenever they asked the old pioneers anything they were simply met with “What do you want to know about that old stuff for?” She did, however, write many articles and poems about local events and family. In later years, when asked by one of her grandchildren about all the empty shops in Barellan, she researched and listed every tenant of every shop. Her completed work was published in the Barellan/Moombooldool history in 2009. Her memory was a great source of information for many other aspects of that book, especially the family histories.

It was an exciting event when every year, we would pile in the car and go on a drive around the mallee roads to gather wild flowers for the Barellan Show. Her interest in nature led Nathalie to research the botanical names of all the mallee flowers. She also photographed them, compiling a valuable record of species, some of which have since died out. Her fame spread interstate, with the help of Ron and Jean Martin from the Temora Research Institute who assisted with this project, and several times she hosted visitors who came long distances to see and study the flowers. One botanist visiting from Melbourne, declared the Moombooldool mallee had the best variety of native flora outside Western Australia. For several years, Nathalie entered a dish garden in the Barellan Show and encouraged her children to do the same. She always won first prize, so after a few years stopped entering in order to encourage other competitors. Nathalie also competed in the cooking section. She did not particularly enjoy cooking, but felt she had to attempt to impress her mother-in-law.

It was in the late 1970s, that Nathalie took to researching the Semmler, Gordon and Bruce families. She did an enormous amount of work... all in the days prior to computerised records and ancestry.com. She also undertook excursions to visit cousins and their families in South and Western Australia, collecting more information and family photos. Nathalie always considered that Jack’s relations were hers as well and over the years, kept in contact with both Semmler and Storm families. In 1983, she met several new rellies and visited family haunts when visiting Scotland. In more recent years, she was overjoyed to know that through the modern science of DNA tracing, cousin Rod Bruce located one of Nathalie’s lost first cousins and her family in Scotland.

After Nathalie’s brother, Bruce Gordon, returned from the second world war, he continued farming at Moombooldool and a few years later, married Aileen Kelly. Nathalie loved her four Gordon nephews and took a great interest in their development and careers. She always enjoyed and very much appreciated their visits after they moved to Queensland.

In the mid-1940s, Nathalie’s parents retired to Kiama. The Semmler and Gordon families enjoyed many holidays with them. I don’t know how mother managed to lug all those children and luggage on a 500-kilometre journey, half on unsealed rough roads, in a 1938 Chev, with me bouncing up and down on her lap, then doing it all in reverse 3 weeks later.

Nathalie's husband and our father, Jack, died in June 1982. It was after his death that in her loneliness, Nathalie turned her hand to the pen and documented the history of both farms and wrote even more biographical stories and poetry.

Nathalie often remarked on how the four farms on which she lived were all in the mallee and she ended up retiring to Mallee Street in Barellan. There was nothing she enjoyed more than wandering around in the bush, poking among the mallee trees and collecting flowers or animal-shaped stumps.

While at Cannie School in Victoria, two of her classmates were the Williamson brothers, one of whom became the father of singer/songwriter, John Williamson. John's album, *Mallee Boy*, was one of her favourites as he sang of things dear to her heart. The last book she re-read was John Williamson's biography. On one of my recent visits to Mother in the nursing home, she was lying on her bed, trying to remember the words to one of John Williamson's songs... *Galleries of pink galas, Crystal nights with diamond stars, Apricots preserved in jars, That's my home*. She not only loved the mallee, but also her garden, and how many thousands of apricots did she preserve in jars?

Nathalie had many life-long friends, and although most are now deceased, their families have stayed in contact. She supported many people in her life, both spiritually and humanely. When the occasional needy family came to the Moombooldool area, she would quietly offer friendship and necessities.

At Nathalie's 100th birthday, we had a family-only celebration where she did not make a speech, but simply stated that she wished her husband was there to see the large extended family that they had produced... over 50 including partners. She loved all her grandchildren and their families and gave them support when she was able. We will always remember her as a loving and caring mother who rarely used a heavy hand, but, like our father, led by example.

In the year 2000, Nathalie moved from Barellan to a retirement unit in the Leeton Masonic Village, where she made many new friends. Her final 10 years were spent in the Alf Herrmann Nursing Home. It was of great comfort to us that our mother was in such safe hands, and we offer our grateful thanks to Judith Dahlenburg and her staff for the care and attention offered in those years. We were touched by the genuine sadness expressed by the staff at her passing.

Nathalie was the last surviving of her 26 Gordon cousins and the last of her six Bruce cousins, that generation spanning 120 years.

When packing up her belongings, I found an entry, in her beautiful handwriting, in one of her many notebooks.

John Wesley's guide for living a helpful life:

Do all the good you can
 By all the means you can
 In all the ways you can
 In all the places you can
 At all the times you can
 To all the people you can
 As long as ever you can.

I am sure Nathalie tried to live by that philosophy, as an example to us all.

Finally, thank you to family and friends, some of whom have travelled vast distances to be with us today, to honour a lady who in her own modest words, had a good life.

I feel it would be amiss if I did not conclude with one of our mother's many poems. It is called.....

The Farmer.

*Oh, cloud of promise, come my way-
 come spill your liquid gold, I pray
 Upon my swiftly wilting crop
 or else I stand to lose the lot!
 And cloud, if you have some to spare,
 do give my neighbour his just share;
 If you have but a shower to give,
 in gratitude we'll always live.*

And five months later....

*Oh, cloud of menace, keep away,
 just float some other place, I pray-*

*For harvest we have just begun,
with wheat already shot and sprung.
Of liquid we have had enough,
so go elsewhere to drop your stuff-
And we will ever grateful be
and likewise, will the mortgagee!*

Thank you.

Colin Semmler