

The Reflections continue....

We resume our selection of interviews with long standing members of our community. This month our reflection focuses on Irene and the late Malcolm Mills. Remember, if you think you know of some-one we should chat with and who may share their story with us please contact Deb at the Shire.

You can email suggestions to ea@dalwallinu.wa.gov.au or call on 9661 0500 and have a chat with Deb about your suggestions. All suggestions are welcomed.



Irene and Malcolm Mills

Irene Mills (AM)(OSs.J) was born in King Edward Hospital in Subiaco in 1943. Her parents were living in Leederville when she was born. Irene grew up with two sisters (Irene being the middle child). Her father was in the Army and they farmed at Ardeth, (between Bruce Rock and Corrigin) after the war then at Many Peaks (38klm north east of Albany). Her father was allocated land after his service along with twelve families who all moved to the Many Peaks area to establish new farms in the area. The families all lived in tents for the first two years.

Malcolm Mills was born at Brookton in 1934 where his family were farmers at nearby Aldersyde (between Brookton and Corrigin). Malcolm was one of six children with two brothers and three sisters. His family

relocated from Aldersyde to Beacon before moving to take up land to farm in Pithara in 1938.

Irene's early schooling was done by correspondence before attending Bruce Rock for 12 months. The family then moved to Many Peaks in 1952. The school wasn't constructed until 1954 so she again did correspondence for a couple of years. Irene eventually left school aged fourteen. Irene recalled once the school was built there wasn't a proper bus so the children rode in the back of a truck to school sitting on hay bales. If they were lucky the truck was washed first, but if not they had to sit on cow poo to get home from school. They would walk two miles to catch the bus and then it was a further ten mile trip to school. In 1958 Irene recalls thirty six children attending the school.

Malcolm attended Pithara School before moving to Northam School where he had private board. He finished his education at Wesley College as a boarder for the last two years. When in Pithara he was able to ride his bike to school until he moved away to become a boarder.

Once Irene finished her education she worked on the farm with her father and older sister. She did all aspects of farm work including driving tractors. When she was about seventeen Irene left the family farm to help friends of her fathers with their small children at Pithara. These friends were in fact Mr and

Mrs Mills (*Malcolm's parents*).

Malcolm also went straight to the farm after school and with the exception of National Service he remained working the farm until his death.

Malcolm and Irene married when she was twenty four and they were devoted to each other and their community until Malcolm passed away seven years ago. They worked their farm together and although they never had children of their own there was always families around. The township of Pithara was thriving and busy and there was a dance or ball in the Town Hall frequently.

Irene recounted taking part in many activities in Pithara in those days. She played hockey, badminton, tennis, golf and was part of the Junior Farmers Club where she became involved in public speaking.

The ABC ran a competition on Public Speaking and Irene was a State runner-up. After they married she continued her sport. She also remained involved in the Junior Farmers and in later years was an Adult Advisor to Junior Farmers and school children.

Irene was involved in the local shows. She not only entered into competitions, in later years she judged the cooking at the Moora and Dalwallinu shows. She also recalls entering competitions at the Royal Perth Show and

Place of wheat and wattle....

winning the Purple Ribbon for the most points in cookery two years in a row in 1989 and 1990.

Malcolm along with farming fulltime was captain of the Bowls team for many years. He was also Chairman of the Pithara Co-op and involved in Landcare and Agriculture and politics. He was a Shire Councillor from 1987 to 2003.

Irene is something of an unsung hero in the district. Many would not be aware of the many accolades Irene has received for her services to the community and in particular to country health services.

In 1996 she was awarded an Order of Australia AM for services to health in rural communities. For more than twenty seven years she was also a volunteer ambulance driver and later ambulance officer, as well as local Secretary and Treasurer of St John Ambulance. She was made a Life Member of St John Ambulance Association and in 1998 was awarded an Officer Serving Sister Medal (OSs.J).

In 2001 she was named West Australian Volunteer of the Year by the National Health and Medical Research Council. Irene chaired the Dalwallinu District Hospital board for more than ten years.

She has been a member of twenty or more different committees and

has convened and chaired meetings here in WA and also in Canberra. In 2004 she wrote and presented a paper on "Aged Care in Small Rural Communities" at the International Federation on Aging convention in Singapore. She also wrote and presented a paper entitled "Recruitment and Retention of General Practitioners to Rural Areas" at the National Conference of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners which was subsequently published in the Australian Journal of Rural Health.

Locally she was involved initially as secretary, and later as Chairperson of the Dalwallinu Community Resource Centre, was on the steering committee instrumental in the establishment of the Dalwallinu Tele-Centre, Chairperson of the Western District Health Advisory Council, Member of the Wheatbelt Heath MOU group and many more committees to support and enhance life in rural communities.

When asked about what she misses now that isn't around anymore Irene stated it was the lack of fellowship in the Community that is sadly missing today. She would like to see more activities and facilities available for the elderly especially support services.

One thing she says young people wouldn't understand today is the support and provision of care the elderly used to get and she wishes there was more of it today. Irene also feels that life today is "too instant" and young people are not used to waiting for anything.

Her passion today is continuing to contribute to ensuring rural areas such as Dalwallinu maintain a presence. She is concerned about rural areas struggling to attract and retain professionals to their areas. She will continue to fight to ensure that there is equitable services in rural areas to the same degree as urban areas.

In Irene's own words "I have continuously strived for improvements to standards, sustainability, facilities and opportunities for rural communities..... The communities that survive will be those with good leadership and preparedness to work collaboratively with others and who look positively towards the future embracing new technologies."

This is only part of Irene's community journey, additional though not mentioned here, is the 15 years she spent representing rural health and rural women's issues concurrently at a National level in Canberra.

An amazing community minded woman who has dedicated her life to her husband and to enhancing the health of her community. We thank Irene for sharing both her and Malcolm's story with us.



A selection of awards and medals of appreciation and recognition Irene has been awarded over the years.