JUNE HARKNESS

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By Tania Chandler

Pandemics, bushfires and war

I interviewed June Harkness, and wrote this story, during COVID-19 lockdown. June told me about her formative years, of living through the polio outbreak, Black Saturday bushfires and World War 2. For June, COVID is 'just another thing.'

June was born in Preston in the winter of 1929. She was named June, not because it was her birth month, but because her mother — the oldest of six children — had a younger sister called Jean, who died at birth. June's grandmother objected to the name, so she was given the one nearest it.

June's childhood home was in Reservoir, not far from where she lives now with two of her five sons. She went to Tyler Street Primary School, and remembers that school went to Grade 8. In Grade 6, students — or, more likely, their parents — decided if they wanted to complete primary school or leave and go to a high school or a technical school. Girls went to high school to learn about cooking; boys went to tech school to learn about woodwork. Those who stayed on until Grade 8 learnt more about arithmetic, history, geography, spelling and writing, with 'a little bit of cooking or woodwork on the side.'

In 1937, June's parents were notified by the school about a frightening situation — a poliomyelitis (polio) outbreak. Polio is a highly infectious, sometimes fatal, viral disease that largely affects young children. It can attack the nervous system and cause paralysis. June remembers her school being closed for three months. Children were not allowed to leave their property for any reason. June was an only child — her brother Keith hadn't been born yet. The family at the back had two children; fortunately, there was a gate in the adjoining fence, so they could all play together. June recalls it as a terrific time, and feels sorry for children who have been alone during the current lockdowns.

Although none of June's family or friends contracted polio, she remembers seeing people afflicted with 'the horrible disease being wheeled around the shops in wheelchairs, and lying down in long half-bed-half-wheelchairs.' Some patients were confined to an 'iron lung': a huge metal box attached to a respirator. Electricity blackouts were more frequent in those days, and June remembers that people with iron lungs in the home were notified to seek alternative power arrangements when thunderstorms were forecast. June also recalls her five sons — Leon, David, Gary, Trevor (passed), and Neil — getting 'the pink stuff on the spoon', along with other vaccinations, many years later. The oral Sabin polio vaccine wasn't available in Australia until 1966[1] — 29 years after the outbreak which closed June's school, unlike the recent COVID vaccines that have been produced relatively quickly.

June also recalls tuberculosis (TB), another disease for which there was no vaccination, being prevalent when she was young. TB is a bacterial infection, which usually affects the lungs, but can involve the kidneys, bones, spine, brain and other parts of the body.[2] June remembers there was a TB sanitorium at the back of Mont Park and Larundel. This was Gresswell Tuberculosis Sanatorium for males, which sat on the grounds of Mont Park Hospital in Macleod, and admitted TB patients between 1933 and 1970[3]. 'In those days it was just paddocks and bush out there,' says June. And for her generation, there was no such thing as vaccination.

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June's great uncle, Edward Anderson, owned two timber mills in Marysville and, in the dry summer of 1939, June and her mother went up to Mill No. 1 for one of their regular holidays. They travelled by 'service car', which you caught in Flinders Street in the city — from there it took you to Marysville via Kew and Healesville. If, like June's parents, you didn't have a car, service cars were the only means of getting to places like Marysville. They

[1] https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/polio-vaccine-introduced-in-australia
[2] https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/S_T/Tuberculosis
[3] https://www.findingrecords.dhhs.vic.gov.au/collectionresultspage/Gresswell-Sanatorium#gresswell-history-in-brief

were big, long cars, which June describes as ‘like a limousine is today.’ The biggest ones took about ten passengers. June recalls the service car passing through Croydon and Lilydale, ‘which was country in those days,’ and up the narrow, winding Black Spur forest road. Once they left the main road, it was all dirt tracks and a dribble of a creek.

On 13 January, fanned by fierce winds, the bushfires which came to be known as the Black Friday fires, swept across large areas of Victoria. Flames leapt great distances, and the ferocious winds ripped out large trees. Townships, including nearby Narbethong, were completely destroyed. [4]

When June saw the footage on TV of the Black Saturday fires in 2009, it reminded her of the fire she survived as a little girl. The tops of the mountains surrounding Marysville were ablaze that night, and the fire was coming down. Flames jumped treetops as they leapt towards the mill. ‘We relied on people making it up the Black Spur and advising ahead of what was coming, how long we had to get out.’ When it was reported that the fire was close, a timber worker drove June and her mother to June’s great aunt’s house in Marysville. They were lucky; the car behind them became trapped and never made it out.

All the men had gone to protect the mills, so it was up to the women to save the town, including half a dozen guest houses and a hotel. They had to turn June’s great uncle’s horse loose. June’s great aunt drove one of her two cars into the centre of Marysville and left it there in the middle of the road where she hoped it would be safe. She then ran back to her home and drove the second car down into town as well. The woman who worked at the picture theatre was moving things to safety when her hair caught fire.

Ten-year-old June, her mother, and her great aunt were up all night, beating away with wet hessian bags the flames on the trees, and any sparks that landed on the veranda. They wore clothing made of thick velour — ‘velvet-like stuff, like under-floor coverings, made mostly of wool, which doesn’t burn quickly.’ They saw one half-built house on the mountain go up in flames.

[4] https://prov.vic.gov.au/about-us/our-blog/black-friday-1939

‘There was no communication like there is nowadays,’ June says. ‘In the country, you had a phone on the wall, you turned the handle and were connected to the post office, who put you through to who you wanted to talk to. With the fires, all the lines to the city were inaccessible. Nobody could get through. June’s father had no way of knowing if June and her mother were alive or dead. Nor did the women in town know if the men who had gone to save the mills had been burnt, or if they would return.

June’s great uncle and his timber mills did survive. Mills were built near creeks, and their surroundings were clear of bush so the logs wouldn’t catch fire. Mill No. 1 was a little settlement: 12 unpainted weatherboard houses where the mill workers with families lived, and a bigger weatherboard ‘boarding house’ for the workers who were single. Only two of those houses were left standing. The men survived the fire by lying down in the creek or on the cricket pitch they’d made on the bare earth.

After the fire, the men walked up the narrow rail-track — which was normally used to haul cut tree logs via a trolley from the top of the mountain to the mill — and then down into Marysville through ashes and burning trees. Some men were badly burnt and very sick. Years later, June’s great uncle was driving his timber truck up the Black Spur with the window down and his arm resting on the door when a truck coming the other way took his arm off. He eventually died from lung cancer, attributed to breathing the heat from those bushfires, as did most of the men who were there.

The next day, trees were still burning and smouldering as road workers started clearing them from The Black Spur. There were no machines in those days; the clearing was all done manually. June and her mother took one of the first service cars that made it through in the afternoon to pick up anybody stranded or wanting to go home. The car was forced to stop often as still-burning trees crashed down around them. ‘The Black Spur was the worst part.’

With all the phone lines down, it was unknown to June and her mother that June’s father — driven by June’s great uncle — was on his way up to Marysville as they were coming down. ‘It was such a relief to reach Healesville,’ June says. Not as much of a relief as it must have

been to June's father learning from locals that his wife and daughter had survived. Nine months after the fires, June's brother, Keith, was born.

'In those days, there was no way to let people know when fires were going to go hit Marysville. Nowadays, they know exactly where and when fires are going to go through,' June says. 'It was like the war — people didn't know what was happening until one or two days after.' June would go to the movies with her friends on a Saturday, and news was shown before the pictures started. That, and the radio and newspapers, were the only ways they got news. 'Nowadays, it's right there in front of you as it's happening.'

June remembers hearing news of the impending second world war coming through the gigantic polished-wood wireless, and the smaller radio that sat on the kitchen mantel. She describes the lead-up to the war as 'the frightening part', when shocking stories about Hitler and gas chambers were being broadcast. Years later, when June's husband, Jack, an industrial chemist, was working at a chemical company owned by a Jewish family (the Kormans), June noticed a number tattooed on Mrs Korman's arm. 'I was so shocked,' June says, shaking her head.

During the war years, primary school children knitted khaki woollen scarves and socks to send to the soldiers. Food was rationed. Families were given coupons for food and clothing. It took five or six weeks for supplies to arrive by ship from Europe. Neighbours swapped coupons depending on who needed what.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, if you didn't get your milk from the dairy, it was delivered in a billy by a horse-drawn cart. Cream wasn't delivered; you had to go to the dairy for that. Ice, however, was delivered. The roads in the northern suburbs were all unmade, and children would chase the iceman's cart down the dusty streets, breaking off chunks of ice to suck on. 'We didn't have different foods, like Asian food, back then like we do now,' June explains. Coffee came in liquid form to which you added milk. 'I hadn't heard of a cappuccino.' Nobody drank coffee much. To order coffee at a café was seen as 'different'. Most families had come from England where they all drank tea. Along with sugar and

butter, tea was rationed as it wasn't produced in Australia. These days, June drinks more coffee than tea. She says, 'When cappuccinos came in, they were great.'

Once Japan became involved in the war, people started practising for air raids like those in Darwin that killed over 230 people[5]. Each street had its own air warden, whose job it was to check that households were doing what they were told: everything had to be in complete darkness. Black-out curtains were pulled down over normal blinds, so no skerrick of light was showing outside; inside, people hid under solid tables. The air warden in June's street took his job very seriously, and enjoyed wearing his cap and brandishing his truncheon perhaps a little too much. 'The chap was so particular. He liked organising *everything.*' He wanted an air raid shelter in his front yard because he was the warden, so he dug one himself. Concrete was scarce in those days; he used mostly heavy timber. One night, after a couple of rainy days, he was sitting there in his air raid shelter when the whole thing fell in. He was submerged in clay and mud.

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June's father had fought in Gallipoli in WW1, but he never talked about it. He didn't march or go to the RSL; he believed those types of things glorified war. The only time he mentioned the war was at the table when June refused to eat the crusts on her toast. He would tell her that children in other countries could live for a week on her wasted food. He had been camped near the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, where the soldiers had survived on little more than tinned bully beef and tomato sauce. At night they heard children crying because they had nothing to eat.

June's mother was a dressmaker. She bought her material from the Myer bargain basement in the city. The Victoria Market was another place June and her mother liked to shop. 'You could always get more material for your coupons there. The shops there used to "cheat" a bit, give you a bit extra from the rolls of material.'

[5] https://lant.nt.gov.au/story/bombing-darwin#group-4

June vowed she would never become a dressmaker like her mother. At school, she hated writing essays, but she was good at business letters. She completed Grade 8 and then went to Northcote Business College. At fourteen and a half, she graduated as a fully qualified stenographer and bookkeeper. She started work at a secretarial service in Collins Street in the city, and twelve months later got a job with the Dutch government. In those days Indonesia was called Java and was owned by the Dutch. Even though she was working full time, at home June was still 'under the thumb'. 'Going out with someone, as a couple, didn't mean what it means today.' June went out with a couple of American air-force officers when they were in Melbourne. 'There were some nice Americans. They were good company and happy. They liked to march, and they liked to dance.' The Trocadero dance hall — where the Arts Centre is now — was *the* place to dance. Other places to go out included Flinders Street Ball Room, above the train station; and the Arcadia Ballroom in Thornbury, where the last of Melbourne's cable trams ran along High Street.

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Every Wednesday, before COVID-19 lockdown, you could find June in a tai chi class at Span Community House in Thornbury. Now, like many of us, she's on Zoom. June says the classes are as much about the company as they are exercise, but 'it's not the same as human connection'.

During lockdown, June has gone for daily walks at the oval near her house. Neil, her youngest son, has done all her food shopping. The thing she misses most — aside from tai chi at Span — is picking out her own fruit and veggies. She says she hasn't bought anything new 'in yonks' and is also looking forward to getting some new clothes when things open up.

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