

A DEEPER DIVE INTO THE FAMILY ARCHIVE

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In the last five years, since the start of the pandemic, I've spent a lot of time writing about my close family. The simple process of collating information has helped to provide more insights, but there is always more to discover in the photos and family memorabilia.

Firstly, to entertain my mother, **Betty Pitter**, in a nursing home during the pandemic lockdown, I assembled a compilation of newspaper articles mentioning her in Rockhampton where she grew up. She remembered the ballet performances she hated, the birthday parties, workplace parties, friends' engagements, balls, her debut and many more occasions. Her dresses and flowers were lavishly described. I had not realised the social whirl of her girlhood, nor the amount of newspaper coverage an ordinary person would be given. Her collection of articles in a loose-leaf folder became something she could talk about with her visitors.

Over the last nine months, in an attempt to hand on recollections to my children, I've been shaping my memoirs of my paternal grandparents, **Eric Harding Heath** (b.1890) and **Eileen Maria Kelly** (b.1898) with whom I spent a lot of time. My grandfather died when I was 26, but Grandma lived until I was 42. The plan was to simply write down what I remembered of them, as if I were talking to my siblings, but the more I wrote and edited, the more I remembered.

I started to cross reference with other readily available sources. Data from my detailed Ancestry tree was added in, and I decided to finish up with a deep dive into Trove. Big mistake! Now it would be a long project. There were hundreds of articles mentioning them in the local newspapers from Murwillumbah, Brisbane, Kingaroy, Cairns, and Maryborough where Grandpa worked in the Bank of Australasia. Sorting through it all has taken a long time, but I didn't want to lose any precious insights into their lives, as they moved from town to town, making a new life each time. This data also gave me a

more accurate timeline, the finer details of which I had forgotten, or never known.

The kinds of things I discovered were that Grandma was a dynamo in the Red Cross and Country Women's Association, she was a great organiser and fundraiser, an excellent treasurer and a prize winner at bridge. Grandpa turned out to be a very competitive tennis player although not often the top player in his club. He was the local bank manager but could turn his hand to helping out at the poultry section of the Cairns Show, and putting up shelves in the CWA holiday home. Unlike many other family history resources, newspapers feature women's lives in great detail.

This expanding story, which I'm writing only for the family, now needed illustrations. Searching the internet led to a wonderful database of old Queensland banks in photographs taken by Jack Bain, and held by QUT Digital Collections. Recently, a friend touring Australia by caravan photographed for me the bank in Zeehan, Tasmania.

Part of my inherited family history was a patchy collection of tiny photos from my paternal grandmother, and 87 photographic negatives. (Try explaining *them* to your children!) Over the years I have kept looking at the little photos, but this project required that the negatives be developed.

Yes, I did get a couple of amazing insights from this investment. In two photos Grandma appears in a parade in an unpaved main street, must be Queen Street, Brisbane. She is wearing an Edwardian white uniform unfamiliar to me, and the street bunting has dark crosses. A few minutes on the internet reveals it is a parade to promote the Red Cross in its earliest years of operation in Australia, during the First World War.

Photos from the negatives also revealed a different side of Grandpa. There were many photos of him with his three little boys climbing all over him, having piggy backs, being wheeled in the wheelbarrow, helping their father in the back yard. He was a reserved old gentleman in my lifetime, with a

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twinkle in his eye, but here in his youth he was a hands-on Dad.



"For the Red Cross – Queen Street transformed into fairyland on July 27"

Red Cross Day, 27 July 1918. Page 21 of the *Queenslander Pictorial*, supplement to *The Queenslander*, 3 August, 1918. John Oxley Library, SLQ, Image 702692-19180803-0021
<https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/media/32061>



Eileen Kelly (R) with friend



Eileen Maria Kelly



Eric Harding Heath with the children

A DEEPER DIVE INTO THE FAMILY ARCHIVE (Cont.)



Looks like afternoon tea in the back yard, after a tiring session gardening and keeping the children occupied. The teapot is wearing a beautiful embroidered linen tea cosy. I am still using this same wooden tea tray in 2025.



The Garage, Sulky House, Workshop, Music Room at Northgate

Methodology for mining my archives

1. Regularly keep going over the family photo collections and re-read the inscriptions for new insights.

2. Using a magnifying glass to enlarge the photos to identify the tiniest details and even faces. Usually, I photograph the picture and enlarge it on the iPad, honing in on the details. Over the years, my increased knowledge has helped make sense of details I didn't notice or understand before. For example, one time I noticed that my mother had transcribed something from the back of a photo taken in 1920 at the family home at Northgate. The words made no sense to me until I discovered that my great grandfather and two of his sons were members of the Brisbane Excelsior Brass Band. They played those powerful instruments, the tuba and euphonium, which would never have been allowed in the house. Another photo was described as (uncle) **John Pitter's** place. It was in the uncleared bush, which I later identified as the failed Soldiers' Settlement at Coominya, a well documented piece of Queensland history.

3. Trying to identify the handwriting of each person who has written on the back of the photos, so I can recognise it elsewhere, and make sense of the context. A picture of a decorated cake has Great Grandma's hand

writing on the back, recognised from her hand-written marmalade recipes. She says she has made and iced the wedding cake.

4. Trying to match clothing of the women from photo to photo. It could indicate that photos were taken at the same event, or that it is the same person on a different occasion. I am able to identify my grandmother in a photo because she is wearing the same distinctive woollen top as in another snapshot.

5. Getting any old negatives printed in hard copy as well as digitised. They can be compared side by side. New details do emerge, e.g. is that Grandpa smoking a pipe!? Or a delightful image of unmarried Grandma with tilted chin and tea cup at a picnic.



6. Making a timeline of the photos, as best I can. Making a timeline of my subject, whether it is Grandma, or her childhood home, "Ellida" in Oriel Road, or the Devonport Methodist Church yearly activities.

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7. Collecting all the photos of each significant house and garden, and identifying the location of the house. Sometimes identifying one element of the photo eg, garden plantings, fences, house features, clothing, anything in the background, may help to identify eg a birthday party in another photo.

Collecting and organising the unsorted data is yielding a tighter sense of the continuity of the story. While giving context, it also reveals holes in the story. After writing about eighty pages (however did it get that big?), I suddenly realised I didn't know how Grandma met Grandpa. They married in 1922. Pretty big hole in the story. No one living knows the answer!

In their timeline, as far as I know it, they don't meet. Grandpa was born in Melbourne in 1890 and grew up in Devonport, Tasmania, working in banks in Murwillumbah, Zeehan, and Sydney before enlisting for WWI in Devonport in 1917, after which he was posted

overseas for more than a year. Grandma was born in 1898 and lived in Brisbane. She met other soldiers, but I know she knew Grandpa in at least 1918 because she wrote to the Army asking for his overseas address. The letter is in his military record at the National Archives of Australia. Still a mystery.

When starting to write a story, it's a logical step to gather information as widely as possible, but I found it was also important to re-examine what I already had. Over the years of research, my increased knowledge has shed new light on old photos and letters. I think this is a good research methodology for family history in general.

Re-examination can also show what data doesn't fit and may be wrong; what is missing and may indicate a need for more research; and with serendipity it may reveal a happy sequence of events that gives a new insight.

(photographs provided by the author) ■
