

LOVE, MARRIAGE, BABIES, THE WHOLE DARN THING...EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

MOLLIE'S STORY

LOVE: Mollie found love. His name was Harry. Mollie met him through a girlfriend and she had met her friend through tennis. Everyone played tennis and Mollie's family particularly, excelled in sport – and art or music. Everyone played something, whether it was vigaro, tennis, of course, golf, football, lawn bowls, swimming, even skiing! Mollie's brother was a very good runner and another relative was a champion rowing cox at the age of thirteen! Mollie believes it was the encouragement they all received at school, and at home, which enabled them all to do so well in sport and the arts.

Through sport Mollie's family networked with other families, mainly on Sydney's North Shore. When she was at Artarmon Primary School, sport was promoted and even Saturday mornings featured sport. Later, as a young woman working for the Sydney Couturier Madame Sawle, she also had Saturday mornings free for sport, and socialising, as her work week was very, very busy. Mollie knew Harry for about eight years before they finally married in 1941.

Harry had lived on the same street as another friend, and they ended up 'knocking around together'. Gradually the relationship became more solid, and even when Harry went to Melbourne for work, they used to write to each other. However Mollie's mother had said, 'Mollie, you shouldn't string that boy along – do something about it!' So she did!

MARRIAGE: Mollie and Harry were married in the Garrison Church in the Rocks area of Sydney. It was right in the middle of the war and Harry was in the Air Force. He had originally trained as a fitter and turner, but was very clever with his hands and with new ideas, but he had not had an opportunity to shine. By marrying Mollie he gained access to a wonderfully strong family, particularly the women. Mollie was supported by not only her very competent mother but also her equally competent sister, Margaret. Mollie made her wedding outfit but had decided she did not want to look like a traditional bride since she had spent so many years making and beading bridal gowns. Instead she made a beautiful dress in an original design and teamed it with a large picture hat and a pretty basket of flowers. A fashionable pair of plum coloured shoes have been kept from this time as well.

For the wedding a fruit cake was produced since rationing did not seem to be a problem with everyone pooling their coupons. It was all done in rather a hurry, the cake, that is! But it was not one of the best cakes baked by Mollie's mother, however it was delicious and they all had a wonderful time at the wedding and the reception.

Harry was away at Evan's Head during the war. He had volunteered right at the beginning of the hostilities and he became a bombing and gunnery instructor. He had trained to be a rear gunner in aircraft used for spotting and chasing Japanese submarines along the east coast of Australia. At one point he was instructing. His

squadron was sent overseas. The instructors were ordered to stay behind. The whole squadron was wiped out in Singapore!

Mollie was twenty nine when she married Harry in 1941. Already the asthma which would dog him for most of his life was evident. He was very supportive of other servicemen who were ill and when the war ended they were all able to study in new areas. Harry had become an accountant after the war and then had worked for a big wool firm. He also worked for a firm of Canadian Merchant Bankers.

While he was away during the war Mollie stayed with her family in her old family home at Artarmon. Everything has been carefully kept from the early days at this house even baby clothes. Not just any baby clothes – no, they were made by Mollie's Aunt Margaret for Mollie and her siblings, Margaret in 1910, Mollie in 1912 and their little brother in 1914. A lone tiny brown baby shoe has also survived from this time. Even the beautifully made heavy white cotton nighties worn by Mollie's mother for her confinements were kept in a big suitcase on top of a large wardrobe in Artarmon.

BABIES: In 1943 Mollie fell pregnant with her daughter Georgea. When she was in hospital she decided to wear the same heavy white nighties her own mother had worn, roughly thirty years before. But she found they were too hot!

Harry's asthma continued to be a problem and he was hospitalised several times. Georgea as a potential only child had enormous attention lavished on her by her doting grandmother and aunt. For the first seven years of her life she lived in a strong supportive atmosphere with her mother, grandmother and very capable Aunt Margaret. They moved to Roseville Chase then a year later in 1951, baby Roger arrived. Everyone had thought there were to be no more babies but the doctor said, 'Don't be silly!'

THE WHOLE DARN THING.... What fun for Georgea! The neighbours were wonderful. A near neighbour was young Dick Smith, who would become a well known businessman and entrepreneur. He was a year younger than Georgea and another neighbour, a year older, was Bronwyn Setright, who would later become a Member of Parliament known as Bronwyn Bishop. The bush was all around them and for the youngsters it was a terrific playground. Other families in the neighbourhood had young children too, so often several of the mothers got together for holidays down the coast, taking all the children. Georgea had a wonderful time and another family had a tiny boy the same age as Roger – so, everyone was happy.

Harry had a good job, and although they were not affluent, they were comfortable. Mollie loved to buy things and was not keen on budgeting. Her sister Margaret, who had not married, was always on hand to help with the family and to be a confidante and friend. On Friday nights Mollie and Harry could go square dancing because Margaret was always available to mind the children.

Mollie never lost her skills as a high class seamstress, especially having a pretty little daughter to sew for. Georgea remembered saying to her mother before she left for school one day, 'Mum, I haven't got anything to wear!' When she got home from

school that afternoon – there was a new dress, sometimes still with the tacking still around the hem, but a new dress never the less! Even while she was running the home she was also getting ideas for clothing and studying the fashions in magazines. She could then modify them and run them up for everyone – especially for Georgea. Whatever was in fashion, Georgea wore – Bermuda shorts, slacks – even jodhpurs, Mollie made sure everyone was up – to – date in the latest fashions right up into the 60s.

EXPECTATIONS: Mollie had been born in the same year that the Titanic sank. It was a new era, those early years of the twentieth century. Sydney was a modern bustling metropolis and Mollie’s family had lived for generations at its heart in Kent Street. There was a strong family tradition of achievement, not just in sport. All Mollie’s family on her mother’s side were artistic. There were thirteen children in the family, although three died, and Mollie’s mother Ella, was a sickly child and not expected to live. But she did and her particular strength was playing the piano. She played in concerts at Chatswood Town Hall for returned servicemen. She also accompanied various singers and was so good she could manage to get some of the singers back on the right note. She could go to a play and remember the whole score when she got home.

So Mollie was born into a family who could accomplish anything they set their mind to. Her sister Margaret, two years older than Mollie, was very, very bright and had been offered schooling at the selective Fort Street High School. She became secretary to the Manager of the Bank of New Zealand and had been ‘head hunted’ by several firms. She was very active in the unions and had managed to change the working conditions for some employees for the better, especially equal pay for women. Sadly her successes didn’t bring much benefit for her.

However both Margaret and Mollie had benefited from some of the more progressive notions about girls education which had emerged in the 1920s. There seemed to be more inspirational women teachers in these years after the First World War. Many had lost fiancés in the war or had failed to find partners given the massive slaughter, world wide, of eligible young men. Many put their ‘heart and soul’ into educating young women to reach their full potential. Not only in schools but also in the community through church groups and gymnasiums, young women and girls were encouraged to try new sports like vigaro, or participate in gymnastic displays and concerts – all activities designed to boost their confidence in their abilities.

REALITY: Madame Sawle was a high class Coutourier running her Salon in Sydney producing original designs for the ‘carriage trade’ for the Department Store, Farmers. She was extremely selective in choosing young women as her apprentices and only took on three girls at a time. Mollie’s mother had decided that Mollie would work in this area so luckily, through connections with a friend down the road who knew Madame Sawle, Mollie secured one of the prized positions as an apprentice seamstress. So exacting was Madame that each young woman had to work for six months only, for example, on one sleeve, until Madame approved of her work, then she could move onto another item.

Madame worked different times to other businesses, so a working day was very long – 8 am until 5 pm, so poor Mollie had to leave home in the morning at seven. She had to go to work very early in the morning to make up the hours, catching the early train with all the workmen and then she had to catch the ferry! Once, she remembered, she was running late and had to jump onto the ferry and very nearly fell into the water!

Both Mollie and her sister Margaret were very tiny women and Mollie remembered that this had its disadvantages. As the young men crowded onto the gangway to get on the ferry, poor Mollie, being so short, only came up to their necks! She remembered with distaste, that her mouth seemed to be aligned with their blackheads!

Although Harry was often ill, Mollie had a terrific support team – mother, sister, aunts- she too had a terrific Aunty Margaret who made household items as well as clothes for all the family. She also had supportive neighbours and friends with children of similar ages to her own to invite to parties and holidays.

But Harry's illness was a worry. Mollie was particularly good at her job – Madame Sawle had trained her well. So well in fact that she ran her own business, at night, after she had finished working for Madame. When the war ended she was able to set up her own business. She remembered making a slinky, close fitting dress for a young lady for her Twenty First Birthday. The dress was so tight fitting it was almost transparent and required that the young lady not wear any underwear, as it would show! The young lady's father did not approve! Sometimes Mollie was working till one in the morning at her own business!

Mollie has seen so many fashions come and go since she was a young woman in the 1920s. She was able to keep up with them all. Her daughter remembers being so well dressed – she benefited from her mother's expertise. So many young women remained single possibly because of the two world wars – Mollie has lived through them both.

Mollie acknowledges how lucky she was with her strong women relatives backing her. But she also realises how very, very lucky she was that Harry waited over eight years for her, and especially, what a wonderful husband he was. As her daughter Georgea said, 'Dad let her do whatever she wanted!' Sadly Mollie's beloved sister, Margaret, who had lived with her in the same aged care facility in Canberra, passed away a couple of years ago. Mollie still misses her. She is now 97 years old, and feeling a little frail!